# RANCH ROMANCES

Still 15¢ Only

SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER

## Bonanza Man

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

a novelette by

TOM W. BLACKBURN

# Always the last to be let in!

HERE it was again . . . the same old run-around . . . waiting for hours, watching other men shoved in ahead of him. He was always the last to be let in; it was as if they wanted to put off seeing him as long as they could. Gregory never knew why*.

*Don't Take Chances*

In business as in social life, unpleasant breath* (halitosis) works against you . . . stamps you as an objectionable person.

Isn't it foolish to risk putting yourself in this unfavorable light when Listerine Antiseptic provides an *extra-careful* precaution against such offense?

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LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY
*St. Louis, Missouri*

***the extra-careful precaution against Bad Breath*—LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC**

# TRAIL DUST

**THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.**

**A COUPLE of men out in Durango, Colo., who've shunned fishing because of the wear and tear of getting to the streams, made nice trout hauls off the Main Ave. bridge not long ago—to the chagrin of other fishermen who consider a hike one of the necessary evils of a good catch.**

THE MANAGER of a furniture store in Seattle, Wash., views satisfied customers with misgiving since one of them made off with some blank company checks, cashed them as needed, and then wrote the manager thanking him for the nice vacation he'd financed. He went so far in his gratitude as to say that if he were in the neighborhood again he'd stop by for a repeat performance.

**THERE WAS another nudist in Greeley, Colo., recently when a bolt of lightning attacked an elderly man and demolished his clothing, burning him very slightly in the process.**

A NEW divorce angle came to light in Los Angeles when a man won a divorce on the grounds that for 39 years his wife hadn't permitted him to go to a baseball game. In the same town another divorce was granted a woman who complained that when she sat on her husband's lap to watch television, he pushed her off to the floor without even a gentle "Down in front."

**A MISSTEP of another kind occurred at Point Fermin, Calif., when a daydreaming man walked off a 120-foot cliff. When he finally landed he just brushed himself off and strolled away.**

A YOUNG MAN of eight months was enjoying a nap in his parents' car in Holbrook, Ariz., when the car and he were stolen. When the car was picked up the next day 50 miles away, the unruffled youngster was still sleeping.

**A FIVE-YEAR-OLD in Waco, Tex., gave his pop away when he pointed to a juke box in a café and remarked that his daddy had left that machine, but took the other one to Grand Prairie. The other one, a cigarette machine, had been stolen from the café. The cops are now hot on pop's trail.**

CATFISH, like cats, have no great love for dogs, as shown by the story from Fort Worth about the dog that was attacked mid-stream on a fox-hunting tour. The attacking catfish was finally discouraged by a kick from the dog's owner, and saddled to a tree with a dog leash. . . . A "bit and run" dog was reported in Arizona, when a man complained of being beset by a belligerent canine who then hurriedly quit the vicinity.

**IN FLAGSTAFF, ARIZ., it was made official recently that one driver per car was sufficient, when a justice of the peace fined two women who were reported to be trying to operate the same car at the same time.**

*SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER*

# RANCH ROMANCES

November 25, 1949
Volume 155, Number 3

***ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY***

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ELTINGE F. WARNER, *President* ELMER J. CHAMBERS, *Treasurer* FANNY ELLSWORTH, *Secretary*

### Wants More Letters

Dear Editor:
I am a US Army man stationed in Hawaii. I would like to increase my letter writing and was wondering if you would help me by printing this letter. I am 5' 10", brown hair, hazel eyes. My hobbies are swimming, dancing and all kinds of sports. I will exchange snapshots with anyone and will aswer all letters.

SGT. J. F. McDERMOTT
Hawaiian AG Depot
APO 954 c/o PM
San Francisco, Calif.

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### Ex-Sailor

Dear Editor:
Could there be a chance for a lonely guy? I am 23 years old, am 6' tall have black wavy hair and blue eyes. And I would answer all letters. I like riding, fishing and dancing. I have traveled all over the world as a seaman but I have now quit the sea. I would like to hear from people all over the world. I will exchange snaps with anyone.

OTTO MATLEY
1118 Cherry St.
Seattle 4, Wash.

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### Squirrel

Dear Editor:
Having tried before I'm trying again to work my way into Our Air Mail. I am 17 years old, stand 5' 6", have dark brown eyes and curly hair. I weigh 124 lbs. and love life. I have a nickname which fairly fits me, Squirrel. Will try to answer each and every letter so come on people write to a hopeful gal. I have had ten years tap dancing lessons if that helps.

BELVA RHOADES
502 Lewis St.
Silverton, Ore.

---

### Strawberry Gal

Dear Editor:
I am slowly dying of lost hope that I may be one of the chosen few to have my plea printed. I am 5' 3" tall, the mother of 4 grown children, am 35 years old, have brown hair almost grey, and blue eyes. I live here in the Strawberry belt of La. and will tell all who are interested in them all I know about them. I was raised in Natchez, Miss. Although I can't swim I love to watch others. I love to go riding. Here's hoping this plea is printed and if so I hope that I receive letters from all over the world.

MRS. FRANCES C. McKEAN
General Delivery
Hammond, La.

---

### Westerners Take Note

Dear Editor:
This is my third attempt to get a letter in your Air Mail page. I am 39 years old and would like to hear from pen pals between 45 and 50 years old, especially from those living on ranches in the Western states. I will try my best to answer all letters.

ROSE MAISE
Box 523,
Scranton, Penna.

### All Prepared

Dear Editor:
I sure hope I score with this letter. I live in a very small town and most evenings are spent reading or writing. I'm twenty years old and stand 6' 1", weigh 155 lbs. and have light brown hair and blue eyes. I have hired a large box at the Post Office, so how about filling it?

DON COOKE
Box 18,
Glen Souris
Manitoba, Canada

---

### Basketball Man

Dear Editor:
I am 16, 5'6" tall, with blond hair and blue eyes. My favorite sport is playing basketball, and I would like to have some pen pals. I enjoy receiving letters, especially from girls.

JOHN PRATT
Viewfield, S. Dak.

---

### Texan Secretary

Dear Editor:
I want to know what you have against Texans. I've written 4 or 5 times but I guess they hit the waste basket. I hope this plea for pen pals from all over gets printed. I am a secretary, work 5½ days a week and like to write letters in my spare time. I am 5'6", weigh 120 lbs. and have blue-grey eyes and brown hair. I like everything, and everyone, so please write.

LA VELLE SCUDDER
4628 Todd St.
Dallas, Tex.

# Bonanza Man

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

*"I didn't kill Zeb, but I know the man who did."*

CLINT BLAISDELL rode into Golden Gulch on a fine spring evening. You could smell the scrub oak along the hillside bursting its buds, and somewhere a thrush sent up its last call of the day for the mate it was seeking. Clint noted these things, as he had noted them a dozen years before when he rode out of the gulch in search of his fortune, but he kept them in a special pocket of his mind, leaving his nose and eyes and ears alive for other things that might not be so pleasant. Clint had been orphaned at the age of twelve; his boyhood was kind of a gaunt one, and it had sharpened his perceptions considerably.

***CLINT WAS A MAN who rode his ruthless way alone—***

***until he met a danger from which there was no escape***

Lights blazed in the hotel and the Little Casino, as well as in a few saloons and a big building down a side street, but he had seen a lot livelier towns in the past twelve years.

Clint rode up to the livery stable and stopped. He handed the stableman a silver dollar. "You see that he gets a good rubdown. He got a mite warm coming up the gulch."

He tossed his saddlebags over his shoulder and walked across the street to the hotel. Clint signed his name to the register.

"I'll want a big room," he said to the clerk. "The biggest you've got. I need space around me."

The clerk looked at the name and his eyes widened. "You ain't *the* Clint Bliasdell, are you?"

Clint smiled thinly. "I hadn't heard there was any other."

"Oh," the clerk said. "Yes, Mr. Blaisdell, we've got just the room for you. I didn't recognize you."

"No reason you should, that I know of."

"Why, I kind of looked for more. They tell that up Denver way you've got six bodyguards with scarlet uniforms."

"Then they lie. I ride alone."

"Oh."

"Something going on in town, is there?" Clint asked. "I saw a lot of lights upstairs in that big building on the side street."

"Why yes, Mr. Blaisdell. That's the Town Hall. There's a dance there tonight."

"Good. I reckon I'll take it in, soon as I get washed up."

"Well—" The clerk looked uncomfortable. "It's kind of a private affair that Mr. Toland put on. But I guess he'd invite you."

"I guess he would, but I won't wait to find out. Who's Toland?"

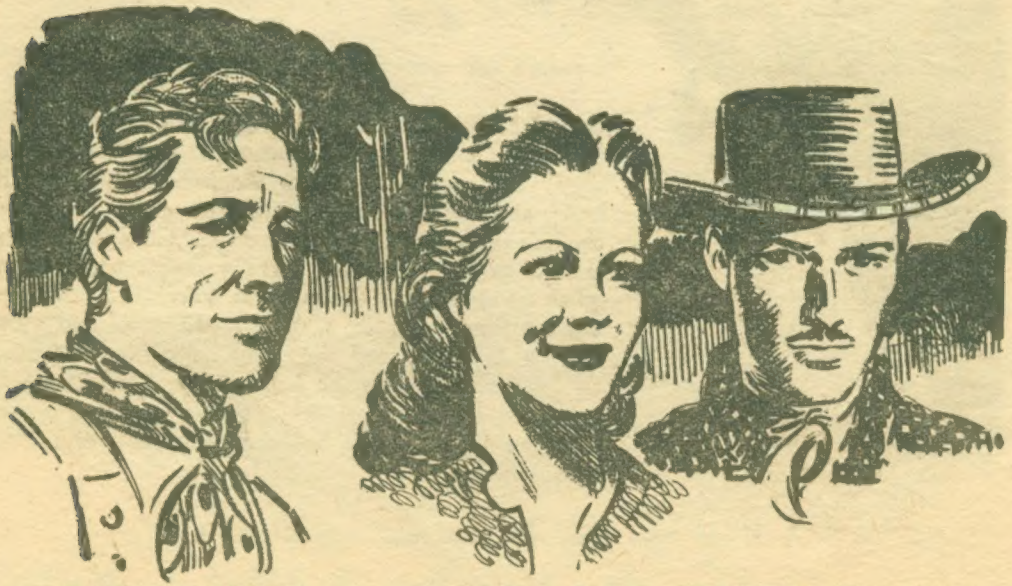
"Why, he's pretty important around here. Owns the Little Casino and—like that."

"I see. Then I sure had ought to go to his party."

Clint took the key and went upstairs. A few minutes later he was back, attired in town clothes except for the highheeled boots which he had never abandoned since his cowpunching days. The clerk had a smile ready for him, but Clint thought it was rather a nervous one.

"If you're going to that dance, Mr. Blaisdell," he said, "you can go right out the back door and cut across. It's shorter that way."

"Thanks."



CLINT BLAISDELL SANDRA CAIN DENVER TOLAND

CLINT went out the back door, stepped quickly to one side and looked around him. Diagonally to his left stood the Town Hall, with lights blazing brightly from the upper story and the sound of music drifting out the window. A board path led directly to it, and a few yards ahead and to the right of the path was a low shed, probably one of the outbuildings of the hotel.

Clint started along the walk, which was made only of planks laid loosely end to end. They clattered under his feet, and he had gone only a short distance when he stepped off onto the soft ground. He walked more slowly now, listening.

The music had stopped, and he was certain that he heard a faint sound from inside the shed. Then he caught a faint flash of movement there. His stepping off the walk had caused the man to peer out for a better look.

Clint threw himself to the left and to the ground. His forty-five was out of its holster even as he struck the ground.

Flame speared out at him from the open doorway of the shed, and the bellow of a forty-five shattered the silence. A fraction of a second later Clint fired, once and then again before the other had a chance to aim.

Clint's quick fall saved him. His assailant's bullet passed over his right side, but his own lead went home. He had not even needed to fire the second shot, for the man was already falling. He spilled out of the doorway to hit the soft ground with a thud, and he did not move again.

Clint picked himself up, walked over with his gun still in his hand. He bent down and examined the man, but he knew that he was dead. The would-be drygulcher had fallen on his face, and Clint turned him over. The face that stared up at him in the dim light was not one that he had ever seen before.

He listened a moment, long enough to convince himself that the shooting was not going to bring anyone running and that there was no one else lurking nearby in the shadows. He brushed the dirt off his clothes as well as he could. Then he went on toward the Town Hall, once again using the plank walk.

SANDRA CAIN was waltzing with a red-haired cowpuncher who did not know how to waltz very well, when a tall, lean stranger came up and tapped the puncher on the shoulder.

"Reckon it's all right to cut in," he said.

ZEB GIDEON JOHN CAIN TIM HAYWOOD

"I guess so," the puncher answered. "If Miss Cain don't mind."

Sandra looked at the stranger. There was self-assurance in every line of him. His grey eyes seemed cold and hard, and yet as he smiled at her they flashed with a reckless light. She supposed he must be a friend of Denver Toland.

"Well—" she began.

"I figured," the stranger said, "that as long as I was crashing the party I might as well pick the prettiest girl in the whole shebang to dance with. How about it? I'm Clint Blaisdell."

Sandra stiffened. So this was Clint Blaisdell, the man she hated most in all the world. She fought a sudden urge to claw at his face until the blood ran down his cheeks. But that was not the way to fight Clint Blaisdell—there must be another way.

"Of course," she said. "I've heard of you, Mr. Blaisdell."

He swung her away, dancing smoothly and well. "Most people have, Miss Cain," he assured her, not as if he were boasting but as if he were stating a fact.

"They say," she told him, "that the great Clint Blaisdell punched cattle right here in this valley at one time."

"For a spell," he admitted.

"And went up Delavan way to make your fortune. And took another cowpunching job there, and got fired because you dug so many holes in the ground the cattle were falling in them. But in one of those holes you found gold."

"That's right. And then I went crazy and lost it all in a poker game."

"All but fifty dollars, the way I heard it. Because by that time Squaw Gorge was folding up, turning into a ghost town, and you bought the building that had been a gambling hall for that amount. You tore it down and panned three thousand in gold dust from the ruins, spilled there by other careless poker players."

"Still right. Within a few dollars."

"And with that money," Sandra went on, "you bought in on a claim with some ignorant immigrants."

"They wasn't so ignorant. They struck pay dirt."

"So they did. And you were rich again. And you went east and lived high, wide and handsome, in Washington and New York. And then you went broke again." Sandra paused, trying to make certain that her voice sounded unconcerned. "Let's see, weren't you building a railroad, or something of the sort?"

"Trying to. It didn't pan out."

"No, but your next hunting trip did. You shot at a bear and missed, and the bullet cut a crease in solid gold."

He shook his head. "It was a seven-point buck, not a bear. I never could figure how I missed him, except the light was tricky. That's why I went to see where the bullet had gone, and found the gold."

"Now, they say, you're all of twenty-eight years old, and you've been everywhere and done everything, and you're rich again. I've heard a lot of other stories too."

HE SMILED. "What you've told so far is pretty straight. But some of the stories ain't."

"I see." The music had stopped, and Sandra looked up at him, trying still to be casual. "But there is talk around, Mr. Blaisdell, that you're thinking of settling down now, right here in Bear Claw Valley."

"That so?" He was weighing his words now, she thought. "Funny how that kind of talk builds up. Fact is, I am interested in looking around."

"Well, I don't think there's anybody to stop you," Sandra assured him. "And I guess you know the valley well enough to look."

"Maybe. I wasn't here long, and that was a dozen years ago. I just remember it was sort of pretty. What I need is to have somebody along like yourself, that really knows her way around. I expect you've lived here all your life, haven't you?"

"A good deal of my life," she answered.

"Well then, how about riding out with me tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not," she answered. Before he could speak again, a dark-

haired man, with clothes cut almost as well as Clint's, stepped up and tapped him on the shoulder. Clint turned slowly, looked into eyes which showed their owner's annoyance.

"Mister," the man said, "I don't recall inviting you to this party."

Clint smiled thinly. "It doesn't matter. I'm Clint Blaisdell. I invite myself to parties."

The other's eyes widened a bit, but the annoyance changed to anger, only thinly veiled. He looked at Clint a long time, measuring him. When he spoke, his voice seemed pleasant enough.

"So I've heard. And I'm Denver Toland. Maybe we ought to have a little talk in my office after the dance is over."

"Denver Toland, eh?" Clint nodded. "Well, now that you mention it, maybe we had."

THE LITTLE CASINO was still wide open and doing a rushing business when Clint threaded his way between the gambling tables toward the upstairs office of Denver Toland.

He had just walked Sandra Cain home to the house where she lived at the edge of town, and his thoughts were still with her. He had not really learned much about her, save that her father kept the hardware store in the town. If a man were going to settle down, more or less, he would need a pretty, and reasonably dependable, wife, and it looked to him as if he had found the right girl.

He walked casually up the stairs, every sense alert. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell Denver Toland that if he wanted to talk to Clint Blaisdell, he could come to Clint Blaisdell's room, but he had decided to say nothing. It was a better idea to get some idea of the lay of the land around Toland's domain, for he suspected he was going to have further dealings with the man in the very near future.

He found Toland's office at the end of the hall, and he pushed open the door and strode in without knocking. He preferred not to have Toland too ready to receive him.

If Toland was startled, however, he gave no sign of it. He stood up, smiled pleasantly, and waved to a chair.

When they were seated, Toland leaned back in his chair and looked almost benevolent. "Well, Blaisdell, they tell me you've come back to take over Bear Claw Valley."

"Is that right? They tell me, Toland, that you run this town."

Toland smiled. "You know how folks talk. I've been here quite a while, and of course I've got influence. I wouldn't say I run the town, but I do try to keep things going smoothly."

"Then maybe you ought to watch them a little closer. Right now there's a tough lying dead out back of the hotel. He tried to drygulch me. You hadn't ought to let such characters run loose around here, Toland—or was he a friend of yours?"

HE WAS watching the gambler's face closely, but beyond a slight raising of the eyebrows Toland showed no sign whatever of emotion.

"Now, Mr. Blaisdell," Toland said, "I keep a respectable place here, and my friends are respectable people. But I suppose you're joking. Tough characters do wander into mining towns sometimes—and a man like you would naturally have some enemies."

"Naturally."

"In fact, I suppose you'd have enemies right here. A man can't just move in and high-handedly take over a whole valley without expecting some opposition."

"Is that what you've heard?"

"I've heard a few things, and I've put a few other things together. The way I figure it, you've decided it's time to get out of mining and settle down to ranching. You'd already bought out a few small ranchers in the valley, before you came here, and nabbed a few government leases that others had made the mistake of letting lapse. But a man like you wouldn't be content with anything less than a whole valley."

"I like plenty of room," Clint admitted.

"And mining's not what it used to be."

"You'd ought to know that as well as

I do. The gold's thinning out. Things must be thinning out a mite for you too, Toland."

Toland shrugged. "In a way. But I came up the hard way, just like you, Blaisdell. Maybe my luck hasn't been quite as good as yours, but I've learned how to land on my feet. As long as there's rich grazing land in the valley beyond, there's no need for Golden Gulch to die. It will turn into a nice, quiet, respectable little cowtown, with plenty of business opportunities for a man who doesn't set his sights too high."

"So you're staying on and running the town." Clint smiled thinly. "It'd be mighty interesting to learn more about those 'business opportunities.' Maybe you were aiming to run the valley too."

The gambler's eyes flashed, and Clint knew that his shot had struck home. But Toland's voice was even when he spoke.

"That doesn't necessarily follow," he said. "But it does follow that we're not going to have a quiet and decent little town here if plutocrats come in and run everybody else out of the valley with their hired gunmen."

"Hired gunmen, hell. I ride alone. If I've got any dirty jobs to do, I do them myself. Maybe that's where we differ, Toland."

"It might be."

Clint chuckled. "Is that what you wanted to know, Toland—that I was alone?"

For a moment the gambler did not answer. Then he stood up, his eyes narrowed and his lips tight.

"Damn you, Blaisdell," he said. "Get out of town."

Clint did not move from his chair. "Toland, I'm not used to that kind of talk from anybody."

"Then you'd better get used to it. There's some things too big even for Clint Blaisdell. You can't buy off a whole valley."

"I can buy any man I want to. Even you, Toland—but I don't guess I want to."

Toland no longer tried to keep the hate from his eyes. "They say you're a fast man with a gun, Blaisdell, but you can't help slipping some time. You've got too many enemies here. If you stay another day, I can't be responsible for your safety."

Clint stood up. "It's nice to have the cards on the table, Toland. I reckon we understand each other. What you're saying is that there ain't room in this town for both of us. I'm inclined to agree with you. Well Toland, you know where I'm staying—and I expect that hired hand of yours at the hotel will keep you up on my movements."

EARLY the next morning, Denver Toland walked into Cain's Hardware Store. He had a pleasant smile for John Cain, who smiled back at him listlessly, but then he walked over to where Sandra stood rearranging the counter. She looked up.

"It was a nice party, Denver," she said. "I had a wonderful time."

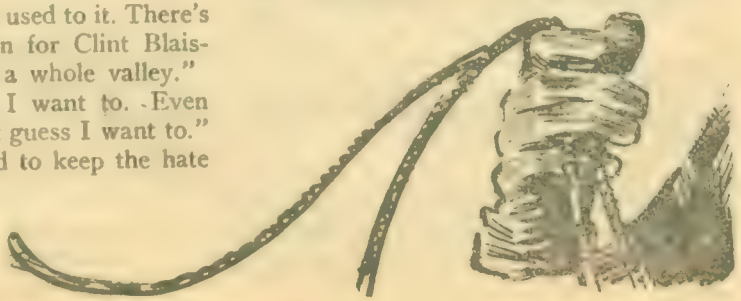
"Well," he answered genially, "folks around here do need a little social life now and then. But you should have had a wonderful time—walking off with the prize of the evening."

"You mean Clint Blaisdell?"

There was an edge to her voice, and Toland noticed it. "You don't like Blaisdell?" he asked.

She looked significantly at her father, puttering aimlessly about the store. "How could I? I hate him."

"You know, Sandra," Toland said, "I'm very glad to hear that, for a number of reasons. I don't care much for the man myself. Seems to me I did hear that your father was involved in that Western Mountain Railroad deal Blaisdell handled."



"He was one of the engineers, and he had everything he owned in it. He almost went to jail, too—all because he trusted Clint Blaisdell."

Toland nodded. "Not, I reckon, a good man to trust."

John Cain had almost died, too, Sandra remembered. His sickness after the crash

*He looked at the masked men, and slowly raised his hands in the air*

was physical as well as mental, and he had been confind to his bed for a year.

"Denver, you don't know the half of why I hate Clint Blaisdell." Her voice had lowered, but it was filled with passion. "We didn't live here then, and you didn't know Dad before it happened. He—he was a different man then. Full of life and full of fun. The kind of father every girl wants to have. Everybody liked him, and he had a kind of theory about the human race. He always said most people were good, if you gave them half a chance."

Sandra paused, glanced at her father again. "Well, he doesn't believe that any more. He doesn't believe in anything, nor care about anything—even his wife and daughter. He isn't really alive any more. And when you sit and see that happen to somebody you love, well—"

Toland shook his head. "And all because of Clint Blaisdell."

"You don't like him either. What has he done to you, Denver?"

"Well, I wouldn't say he's done anything to me, so far. What he can do to me, and to the whole valley, is another thing." He paused, and when he went on his voice held a note that was almost wistful. "You know, Sandra, I had kind of a rough, tough bringing-up, and sometimes I've lived a hard life. But that don't stop a man from dreaming."

"A man without some kind of a dream is pretty empty," Sandra assured him. "I wouldn't care for such a man."

"What I've wanted all along was to live a decent, respectable life. Now, if I could sell out the Casino or close it up, start up a new business in the new kind of town that this is going to be with the gold thining out, I'd be on the right road."

THERE was enough truth in his words to make them convincing. Sandra thought that for the first time she was seeing through the shell of self-assurance Denver Toland had wrapped around him, into the core of the man.

"I think it would be a fine thing if you did that," she told him. "Can Clint Blaisdell stop you?"

"Not exactly. But I had a picture of Golden Gulch turning into a nice, reasonably quiet cowtown, with lots of neighbors coming in to trade. Blaisdell intends to take over the whole valley for his own ranch—you've probably heard that. Well, this won't be much of a town if it has to live at the whim of Clint Blaisdell and his cowboys. But I'm thinking more of what he's doing to the small ranchers in the valley."

"There must be a way to stop him," Sandra flared.

"There may be." Toland was thoughtful. "You know, an idea came to me. But I'd need your help, Sandra."

"You can have it, if it will stop Blaisdell."

"Well, here it is. Blaisdell's carrying a hundred thousand dollars on him in a money belt, to buy out the ranchers that he hasn't bought out already. I happened to learn that."

"Why, anybody could rob him! Is he a fool?"

Toland shook his head. "The thing is, not many people could rob him and stay alive. He's not such a fool. He's got a lot of confidence in himself, and most of it is justified. He trusts nobody but himself, and that's the way he likes to operate. Sandra, I understand you're going riding with him this morning."

"He's coming round in an hour." She hesitated. "I don't know, Denver, if I'd quite go in for highway robbery."

"You wouldn't need to, Sandra." He smiled reassuringly. "The main thing is to discourage Blaisdell enough to get him to drop this scheme of his. The money can go back to him later."

"Do you think that would do it?"

"Blaisdell's got more money, of course. But a hundred thousand dollars would make a dent even in Clint Blaisdell's pocketbook. Most likely the rest is tied up in mines and the like, and he couldn't get it out, right away."

Sandra stood silent, thinking. She looked up to see her father shambling toward them. Suddenly her mind was made up.

"What is it you want me to do, Denver?" she asked.

He leaned toward her. "Now, there needn't even be gunplay. You know the Standing Rocks, don't you?"

She nodded, and he went on to explain his plan.

"I'll do it," she said when he was through. "I'm not even sure that's enough to do to Clint Blaisdell. I want him ruined —for good."

Toland smiled. "That's somethnig, Sandra, that probably only a woman could do to Clint Blaisdell. A woman as beautiful as yourself."

SANDRA and Clint rode out into the valley in the bright morning sunshine, following the trail that led along the creek-bank. Birds flew up as they passed, and chattered at them from the tops of the cottonwoods. At the top of a rise, Clint reined in and looked around him.

"It's mighty pretty," he said. "Just like I remembered it."

Sandra said, "You mean you've always planned to come back here?"

"Well, not exactly. But whenever I thought of a place where I'd like to settle down some time, I generally thought of this."

"But do you have to have it all?"

He turned to her, seeming surprised. "Why, I wouldn't want a lot of neighbors troubling me. It makes a good-sized ranch anyhow—just the size I want."

"Because you're Clint Blaisdell?"

"Maybe. But neighbors make trouble in the cattle business. I'll bet these folks in here don't always get along. I'll bet they fight sometimes."

"I suppose they do," she admitted. "Some of them have lost cattle these past few years. Sometimes they've blamed it on their neighbors."

"Well, that's their business, not mine. Me, I get along with myself all right, and I'd rather play a lone hand any day. When I want help from anybody, I buy it."

"There's some kinds of help, Mr. Blaisdell, that you can't buy."

"I hadn't heard of any."

"Some day, maybe you will."

He shrugged. There seemed no bitterness in his cynicism, only a matter-of-fact conviction. "Maybe. But you're getting me off the track, Miss Sandra. What I was saying was, I'm kind of ready to settle down. This valley is the place to do it. But a man needs a wife if he's going to settle down."

"Do you expect to buy her too?" Sandra asked.

"Why, now—" He broke off, looked at her in a puzzled fashion, and then grinned. "No, I hadn't exactly looked at it that way. I thought maybe some gal would just plain marry me. Fact is, it was you I had in mind, Miss Sandra."

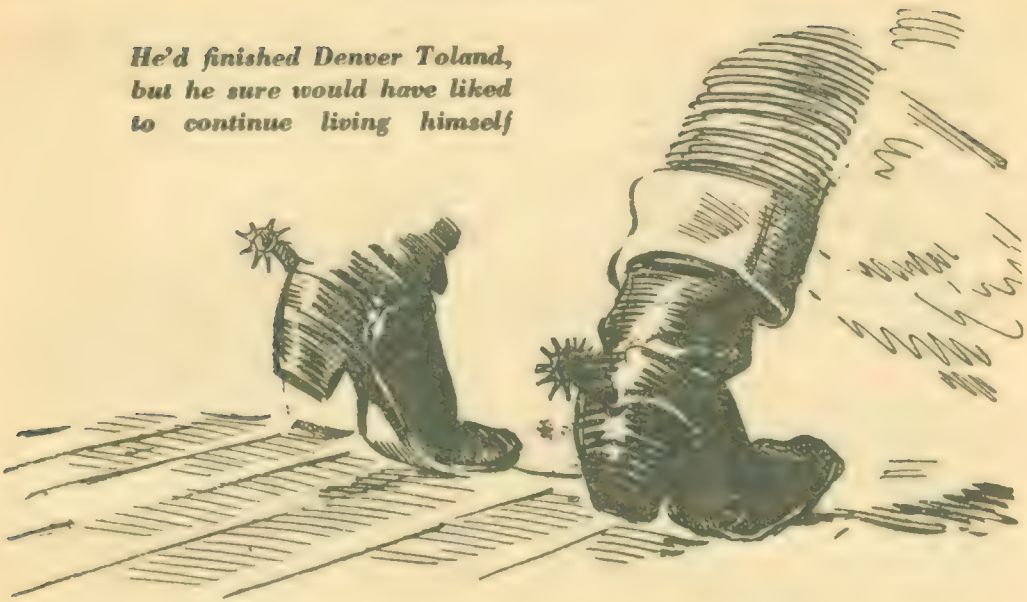
Sandra started, flushed. She had not really expected this, and she felt suddenly guilty. Had she brought it on by being halfway pleasant to him? She didn't like this two-faced game she was playing. Why did Clint Blaisdell, who was good to look at and had such a cheerful smile, have to be such a low-down skunk? It might be hard to hate him, if she did not remember John Cain and what Blaisdell had done to him.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Blaisdell," she said finally. "But I'd be afraid that a man who didn't need help from anybody would soon find out he didn't need a wife either. Besides, before you get as far as marriage, there is such a thing as love, you know."

"Why, yes." He seemed for once at a loss for words. "I—had that in mind." Then he shrugged. "But I reckon this is a little sudden for you. And I've got to get the valley first."

CLINT had planned to make it a straight ride up to the head of the valley today, with no side trips, so that they could be back in town before nightfall. Sandra had packed a lunch for them, and they stopped and ate in the willows beside the creek at noon. Then they pushed on, with the afternoon sun in their faces. At the fork of the creek, Clint turned to the right. The country was getting rougher here, dotted with rock formations and occasional barren knolls.

Sandra reined in. "It's shorter to the



*He'd finished Denver Toland, but he sure would have liked to continue living himself*

left," she lied, "by the Standing Rocks. Easier riding, too."

Clint stopped his horse, turned in the saddle, and looked at her as if studying her words. Sandra's heart pounded.

"Maybe you're right," he said at last. "I never rode this end of the valley much. Anyhow, you're the guide. Let's go."

Another quarter hour of riding and the Standing Rocks loomed up ahead. They were so named because they stood up sharply on either side of the left branch of the creek, almost like chimneys. At the point where the trail passed between them, it was necessary to ride along the creek-bed itself. It was barely wide enough for two horses to ride abreast, but Sandra managed, without its being too apparent, she hoped, to get her mount alongside Clint's and to his right, as had been arranged.

Here they could see nothing of what lay ahead, and for a moment even the sun was obscured. Just as they came out from between the rocks, the trail swerved sharply to the left. Sandra held her breath.

"Stick 'em up!" a harsh voice said.

Four masked men were lined up with drawn guns on the right bank of the creek. To the left rose the sheer rock wall, and there was not room to turn back. Ahead, they would have to run a gauntlet of the four drawn guns.

Yet Clint Blaisdell's hands did not go up. Like a flash, his right swooped down, came up filled with his forty-five.

Expecting this, Sandra had moved an instant before. She spurred her horse, then quickly drew up on the reins. The horse reared. She seemed on the verge of falling from her saddle, and she swayed sidewise, bumped her hand and shoulder against Clint.

The forty-five fell from his hand and splashed into the creek. He looked at Sandra and then at the masked men. Slowly, he raised his hands in the air.

"You're calling the turn," he said. "What do you gents want?"

"Why, Blaisdell," one of them answered, "we want a hundred thousand dollars."

"You're mighty well informed," Clint said with a thin smile. "I expect you know where it is, too. Come and get it."

The one who had spoken stepped forward. "Not that way," he said. "I'll stand by. You just unfasten the money belt and hand it over."

Clint shrugged. "You're a wise man," he admitted. He began to unfasten the

money belt, which was just inside the waistband of his trousers.

Suddenly, Sandra stiffened in her saddle. Clint had unfastened his money belt and was just handing it over, so that he faced the man on his left. And over here on the right, one of the masked men had coolly rasied his forty-five, was lining up the sights on Clint Blaisdell.

Sandra went pale. This was cold-blooded murder, and not in the plan.

IMPULSIVELY, she acted. She kneed her horse forward just a trifle, so that she was between the masked man and Clint. Outwardly cool, but with her heart hammering, she sat her mount and waited for the blast of the gun.

It never came. The man hesitated a moment, then lowered his forty-five. Sandra breathed again.

Certainly Denver Toland had not ordered the shooting. This man must have just wanted to make sure of Clint Blaisdell. Probably he would not try again. Just the same, Sandra kept very close to Clint for the next few moments, so that no one could possibly fire at him without hitting her. It was not until the road agents had taken their guns and ridden away that she moved apart from him a little.

He looked at her intently. "Mighty fractious horse you've got," he said. "He rears up at the dangedest times."

She was caught off guard. "I didn't think," she flared, "that the great Clint Blaisdell would blame a woman for his failures."

Surprisingly, he flushed. "That's one way of looking at it," he admitted.

"Now what will you do?" Sandra asked.

"Well," he answered, "for one thing I'm going to leave you to ride home alone through this bandit-infested country. I'll ride on alone. I can trust myself."

So she had not lessened his suspicion, and there was no use in trying to.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going on to the head of the valley," he told her. "To see Zeb Gideon."

Her heart sank. She knew what going to see Zeb Gideon meant. The holdup had been useless.

"I know," she said. "You want his land. But how will you get it without money?"

He laughed harshly. "I can get more. It won't be that much, but it's enough. Instead of a hundred, the ranchers I buy out will get fifty now. That holdup will cost the valley just fifty thousand dollars."

"Oh." But as he started up his horse she said, meaning it: "You—you hadn't ought to go on, not without a gun."

He laughed again. "You're mighty con-

siderate. Don't worry—I've got one. They didn't look in my saddlebags."

Then he was gone up the trail, leaving her standing there.

AN HOUR later Clint rode into the yard of Zeb Gideon's ZIG ranchhouse, up at the head of Bear Claw Valley. Here the ground was rough and canyon-slashed, and the grass grew thinly. Zeb Gideon did not run more than a few hundred head of cattle, but his log ranch house was set on the margin of a small lake which tricked down into Red Creek below.

Zeb, a small grizzled man with bright blue eyes, was sitting in a hide-bottomed rocker on the veranda, just meditating and soaking in sunshine, when Clint rode in. He looked up, nodded.

"Hello, Clint," he said.

"Hello, Zeb."

The old man motioned to another chair beside him. "Light and sit."

"Thanks." Clint did so.

"I got your letter."

"You didn't answer it," Clint told him.

"Ain't that answer enough?"

Clint frowned. "Blast it, Zeb, I want your ranch."

"You won't get it."

"I'll pay you ten thousand dollars. That's twice what it's worth."

"Money's no good to me. I like it here."

"Then you could stay here. You're a good man with cattle. I'll make you my foreman."

"That ain't the same thing."

Clint stood up. "Confound it, I've got to have this place. It's the key to the whole valley, and you know it. When the creek slows down to a trickle like it does sometimes, everybody in the valley brings their cattle here to water."

Zeb cocked his head sidewise and looked up at him. "Maybe I'd even let Clint Blaisdell bring his cattle here," he said.

"Maybe you would and maybe you wouldn't," Clint stormed. "Maybe you'd die and somebody else would take over this place. I can't take a chance. I've got to own it."

"That's just the trouble with you," Zeb told him. "You was more human when you was fifteen."

"My way's paid off." Clint stood over Zeb, his hands on his hips. "And I didn't come here to get lectured; I came to buy a ranch. I'm going to get it, one way or another. If you don't take my offer, you'll be sorry."

ZEB ROCKED back and forth. "You can't scare me. I knowed you when you was just a dot on top of a cayuse."

"I've grown some since then," Clint assured him. "Clint Blaisdell generally gets his way."

Zeb stood up. "Yes, I'd heard Clint Blaisdell was a mighty big man these days. Most likely too big for his britches. And I'll you something, Clint. That's another reason I won't sell, and that's the main reason. I won't sell out to any man that treats a friend of mine like you treated John Cain."

Clint scowled, puzzled. "Huh? How's that?"

"John Cain that runs the hardware store in town. Have you forgotten him? And the Western Mountain road?"

Clint thought a moment. "Why, there was a Cain, I seem to recall. But there was a lot of folks in that deal. I don't remember—"

"Sure there was. A lot of folks you ruined. But John Cain, he even helped you build that road. And put every cent he owned into it besides. And you didn't just ruin him, you broke his spirit and his mind."

"And that's the John Cain here in town?"

"It sure is. You forget your wreckage mighty easy, Clint."

So that was the reason Sandra Cain had tricked him today. She had probably been trying to trick him from the first moment he met her.

"Of course," he said, "it wasn't me that ruined Cain. I was tricked by Eastern financiers."

"On my books, it's you that did it. And I ain't turning my corner of the valley over to any man that's up to such shenanigans.

You might as well amble on now, Clint. I reckon we've talked enough."

Clint shrugged. "Yes, I reckon we have. From now on, it'll be something besides talk. I still want your ranch, Zeb, and I'm going to get it, even if I have to bust you, too."

As he turned away, Zeb sat down and resumed his rocking. "Maybe," he said, "and maybe not. Maybe I'll be the one that busts Clint Blaisdell. Now wouldn't *that* be something!"

But he had no idea how near he came to speaking truth, nor how grim was his prophecy.

THREE days later, early in the morning, Zeb Gideon swung off his horse in front of Cain's Hardware Store. He waved at Sandra as he strode into the store, but she could see that his bright blue eyes were harsh and angry. He went straight to her father.

"Hello, John," he said. "I'm low on cartridges. I reckon you'll have to trust me, because I've got a passel of shooting to do."

"What's the trouble, Zeb?"

"Rustlers. They run off half my herd last night. I chased them and fought 'em for a spell, but I run out of cartridges."

"Half your herd!" John Cain shook his head. "How many was there in the gang?"

"Three, maybe four."

"Then you'd better get the sheriff, Zeb."

Zeb shook his head. "It's another twenty-mile ride to the sheriff. By that time they'd have too good a start. I've got a note to a cattle buyer due this fall. I need them cows."

"But they've got a good start already, Zeb."

"Maybe. But they headed south into the mountains, and I know that country. Sooner or later they'll hole up some place, and I'll find 'em. Unless they're running 'em clear across New Mexico to the Border, which I doubt."

"Must be an organized gang, Zeb. You'd ought to have help. You got any idea who it was?"

Zeb Gideon pocketed his cartridges, and his face seemed to tighten. "Yes," he said. "I've lost a few cattle over the past year, but I was blaming some of my neighbors. I figure I was wrong. The man that did it, or the man that was back of it, is Clint Blaisdell. He wants my ranch."

John Cain looked frightened. "You can't buck Clint Blaisdell, Zeb."

"Like hell I can't."

"But at least you've got to have help. He'll lick you in the end, anyhow—but you'd better not go alone."

Sandra was listening. His words wrenched at her heart. It was not just that John Cain was a beaten man, afraid of Clint Blaisdell, it was that he would not even fight. He did not want Zeb Gideon to go alone, but he did not offer to join him—not even his best friend. This was not the John Cain she had once known, and she hated Clint Blaisdell again with a fresh and bitter wave of hatred.

"This is a job I'll do myself," Zeb answered. "I've got a special reason. I knew Blaisdell when he was a button, and I saw him again last week. I want to see him squirm. If I don't ketch him, I'll ketch his men and they'll talk. I'll see that they do. Clint Blaisdell's goin' to squirm."

He turned and started out of the store. "So long, John."

"So long, Zeb. But—"

Sandra heard his protest trail off into hopeless apathy. She watched Zeb climb aboard his horse and ride away. Suddenly, her mind was made up.

SHE HAD not seen Clint Blaisdell to speak to since the time of her curt dismissal three days before. He had been in the town, of course, but he had made no move to call on her, and she had hardly expected he ever would. He could not prove that she had had anything to do with the holdup, but he certainly suspected as much. Denver Toland had been around once to thank her, cautiously, for the help she had been, and she told him of the one man who had tried to kill Clint. The gambler frowned.

"I told them not to," he said. "Trigger happy, I guess. I'll talk to that one."

"Anyway," Sandra said, "it didn't do any good."

"Not enough, it seems. But it may help. And there are other things to try."

But Sandra did not think she wanted anything to do with those other things. It was not that her hatred of Clint Blaisdell had lessened, but the whole thing had sickened her, and she was a little ashamed. She did not want to see Clint Blaisdell again under any circumstances.

Now, however, she walked out of the store and toward the hotel. The fierce anger that came to her at thought of Zeb Gideon had conquered her pride. She was going to see Clint Blaisdell, and right now.

Mr. Blaisdell was in, the hotel clerk told her, indicating the corner room. Ignoring his lifted eyebrows, she marched up the stairs and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" she heard Clint ask.

"Sandra Cain."

He opened the door. A faint smile creased his lips. "Well," he said, "I've had a lot of surprises in my time, but I sure didn't expect this one. Especially not from John Cain's daughter. Come in and sit down."

Letters and papers were piled upon his desk. He had been working, she supposed, at consolidating his gains in the valley. Sandra sat down beside the desk, in spite of herself a little awed at all this evidence of power.

"So you found out," she said.

He nodded. "I sure walked right into that one, didn't I? Next time, I'll go a little careful when I meet up with a pretty girl."

"Whatever you think about the other day," Sandra burst out, "I did save your life. There was a man going to kill you when you were unarmed, and I rode in between."

"That so? Thanks." He sat down at the desk. "You know, I lost my shirt too, in that Western Mountain Railroad deal."

"But you soon found another one."

"Sure did. I never admit I'm licked. But nobody had to go in with me on that thing that didn't want to. I was willing to go it alone. I didn't *sell* the stock. They came running for it."

"Maybe they did," Sandra admitted. "When a man gets a reputation like the great Clint Blaisdell, people begin to believe in him. And when that happens, he's got a certain obligation to the people that do believe in him."

He shook his head. "I can't see it that way."

"I guess not. But I didn't come to see you about that. Even the railroad business wouldn't be so bad if I didn't know what you'd stooped to now."

"Why, how's that?"

"Stealing cattle from an old man so you can get his ranch."

He looked genuinely surprised. "You're a jump ahead of me. What's happened?"

"You ought to know," Sandra said. "Last night somebody stole half of Zeb Gideon's herd. Don't tell me it wasn't you."

"Zeb Gideon, eh?" He frowned. "So far, I haven't added cattle rustling to my sins. You mean to say one man did all this?"

"Not one. Three or four. But Zeb says you were back of it." She leaned forward, her eyes pleading. "Clint Blaisdell, I know you don't owe me a thing. I guess I can't appeal to your sense of human decency. But I'm asking you, as a favor, to please leave Zeb alone. Don't turn him in to the kind of a man my father is."

CLINT got up, walked thoughtfully across the room and back. His hand ruffled his sandy hair, and the act made him seem even younger than he was.

"Sandra," he said, "you don't know it, but if there were three-four men in that gang, that proves I didn't have a hand in it. I don't hire men to do my dirty work for me. If I've got any to do, I do it."

He spoke with such an air of earnestness that she half believed him. Before she could answer, however, he said, "Somebody else has dealt himself in. Sandra, did Denver Toland maybe suggest that we ride through the Standing Rocks the other day?"

She started. "I'm not going to talk about the other day."

"I see. What's Zeb doing about those rustlers? Has he got a posse together?"

"He came in for cartridges. He's mad and he's going out alone. He said he couldn't wait for the sheriff, and as for my father, he—he was afraid to buck Clint Blaisdell."

"That's bad," Clint said. He smiled wryly. "When the chips are down Zeb goes it alone—just like me."

Sandra stood up, took half a step toward him. "And like you, he's wrong. He may be riding to his death. Clint, can't you see now that somtimes you've got to have a few friends you can count on and trust?"

He smiled thinly. "Friends that like to ride with you through the Standing Rocks?" he asked.

Sandra flushed. "Maybe I had that coming," she admitted. Then, in a sudden rush of words, she went on. "I'll tell you one thing, Clint Blaisdell. I wanted to ruin you. I wanted to make you pay for what you did to my father. So I'm not hiding anything from you any longer."

"You still feel that way, Sandra?"

"I—it doesn't seem like as good an idea as it did."

He took both her hands in his and grinned. "Why, you keep on like that and I'll almost start trusting you. What is it you want of me now?"

The question took her off guard and she answered. "I—I'd feel a lot different if you'd help Zeb Gideon."

She almost wished she had not spoken, for that seemed to break the spell. He let her hands fall, strode over to the window and looked out into the street. He did not answer for a moment.

"I don't owe a thing to Zeb Gideon," he said at last. "I've got my own problems to handle, and they're plenty. Zeb's chose to play his cards this way. Let him play them. Besides, I want his ranch."

"I see," she said coldly.

He turned. "But I don't like other folks dealing themselves into my game," he said. "I might look into it. I might not."

"That," Sandra said angrily, "is very considerate of you, Mr. Blaisdell. Good-by." And she turned and walked out of the room and down the stairs.

Maybe he would help and maybe he wouldn't. She could hardly count on it. If she were going to be sure of help for Zeb Gideon, she would have to get word to some of his neighbors. Any help, now, might be too late.

ZEB GIDEON, riding hard, crossed the valley and was home before noon. A quarter of an hour later, mounted on a fresh horse and with three days' chuck in his saddlebags, he was heading into the hills to the south. In another half-hour,

*A dozen shadowy figures*

he had picked up the trail of his vanished cattle.

Nobody short of the fabulous Pecos Bill could have moved cattle swiftly through this rough country. Zeb judged that the rustlers were not yet ten miles ahead of him, and he was gaining fast. In less than two hours, the cattle droppings began to look fresh.

It was an easy trail to follow—almost too easy. How had those gents expected to hide the marks of a hundred-odd head of cattle in broad daylight? Did they think he was so scared of Clint Blaisdell he wouldn't even come after them?

A little later, he heard the bellow of cattle not far ahead of him. He eased his Winchester out of its saddle boot and speeded up his horse. If he remembered this stretch of country rightly, the cattle were probably right now trailing through that valley a half a mile or less to the southward.

Something slammed into Zeb's left shoulder as hard as the horn of a charging steer. It knocked him clean out of the saddle. As he fell, the crackling sound of a Winchester drifted down to him.

Zeb struck the ground with his own carbine still in his hand, and he moved fast. That shot had come from that tall ridge up there, just ahead and to his left. His horse had bolted as he fell, so he scrambled to the protection of a waist-high boulder on the right of the trail.

He peered around the boulder, glimpsed movement up at the top of the ridge, and fired. The recoil of the gun brought fierce pain to his left shoulder, which up to now had felt merely numb. It was bleeding quite a bit, too. He had been a fool—he might have known they'd have a man watching the back trail, just in case he did follow.

He fired again at the man on the ridge. This time he saw an arm flung up into the air, and knew that he had scored a hit.

But an instant later, lead thudded into the boulder at his side, spitting rock dust into his eyes. And the sound of that shot came from above and behind him.

They weren't even driving the cattle. They had just stopped and laid in wait for him.

He scrambled around the boulder so that he was protected from the man behind, and tried a shot at him. But that put him out into the trail, and the first man opened up again. Zeb had not hurt him as bad as he had figured.

Damn it, he shouldn't move so much. His shoulder was bleeding badly now, and he felt sick and weak. A third carbine opened up a moment later, and Zeb knew that he was trapped.

And there in the boulder-strewn canyon, within the next half hour, Zeb Gideon played out his string. He did not make it easy for his enemies. In spite of his growing weakness, he scrambled about amongst the rocks, finding a moment's shelter here and there, and getting in a shot of his own each time.

But always the bullets sought him out again, packing at his clothes and searing his flesh. He finished off one of his attackers and he wounded another, but there was a third and then a fourth who came up from holding the cattle at the last.

In the end it was one bullet that got him, neatly in the forehead, but sooner or later any one of half a dozen others already in him would have finished him off. His body was riddled with lead.

LEAVING the Golden Gulch Hotel, Sandra ran into Tim Haywood, one of the small ranchers of the valley, just riding into town. It was a pity he could not have ridden in half an hour earlier, before she went to see Clint Blaisdell. She told Tim of what had happened to Zeb Gideon's cattle, and how he had ridden off to take the trail alone. She picked the right man to tell her story to. Zeb, leading the lonely bachelor life he did, had no friends in town except her father, but out on the range he was known and respected, especially by Tim Haywood.

He whirled his horse about in the muddy street. "I'll pick up a few of the boys," he said. "We'll head right out."

After that, Sandra could only sit and wait. She looked out the window of the

store now and then, wondering if Clint Blaisdell had decided to go after all, and hoping he had. But she did not see him ride away, and she was not going back to the hotel to find out.

It was shortly before sunset that Tim Haywood and the rest brought Zeb Gideon's body back to town. It seemed to Sandra afterward that she had felt a sudden hush in Golden Gulch as they rode in, but at the time she knew nothing definite until Tim Haywood strode into the store.

"John," he said, "I thought you'd want to know that we left Zeb Gideon over to the undertakers." He turned to Sandra. "We was too late. We heard the shootin' as we rode up, but when we got there Zeb had fifteen bullets in him. The killers had skedaddled and left the cattle."

The knowledge seeped slowly into John Cain. "Zeb's dead," he said. His face was ghastly pale. "You think—he'd go that far?"

Two other men had come into the store. One of them was a cowhand who worked for Tim Haywood; the other was a small rancher named Jake Dunning. That is, he had been a rancher—but he was one of those, Sandra remembered, whose government leases had lapsed and been taken up by Clint Blaisdell.

"Who'd go that far?" Tim Haywood asked.

"Why, Blaisdell," Sandra's father answered. "Zeb thought it was him that stole the cows."

"It looks," Tim said, "like Zeb was right. Look at this, John." He reached into his pocket, brought out a piece of cardboard and tossed it on the counter.

John Cain read it as Sandra hurried over to see. "A lodge card," he said. "Made out to Clinton Blaisdell."

"That's right. And we found it on the ground near Zeb's body. It must have dropped out of Blaisdell's pocket when he come down to make sure Zeb was finished."

"He murdered him," John Cain said. "I told Zeb he couldn't buck Blaisdell."

"Nobody can—alone," Jake Dunning put in harshly. "A few folks together can. A fast business deal is one thing, if you can get away with it. Murder's another."

"I expect," John Cain said, "we'd better get hold of the sheriff."

"Sheriffs can be bought," Tim told him. "John, you come look at Zeb."

John Cain went out with them, while

*Coming up in the*

**25th Anniversary Number**

# Hammerack Havoc

***A Breathless Novel of the Cattle Country by the Writer Who Led Off the Very First Issue of Ranch Romances Back in December, 1924***

**FRANK C. ROBERTSON**

Sandra waited tensely. Could it have been Clint, in spite of what he had said? There had been time for him to get there ahead of the posse, all right, if he had ridden at once, and if his men had already laid a trap for Zeb.

WHEN her father came back to the store a few moments later, Sandra looked into the face of a stranger. John Cain was a new man, but the kind of man who would haunt her in nightmares for a long time to come. His back had straightened and his cheeks glowed, but the light that flashed in his eyes was that of a fanatic—a fanatic dedicated to a mission. Tim Haywood and Jake Dunning and a few others she did not know came in behind him.

"My gun's behind the counter," he said. "I've kept it there a long time without using it. I'll be needing it now."

"Blaisdell's chain-lightning with a gun," Tim said. "I didn't count on your going along, John. All I wanted was for you to know that what we was doing was right."

"I'm going," John Cain answered. "And I'm going to be the first one in the door. It's my fault it's gone this far. I should have known all along that this would have to be the answer for Clint Blaisdell. I let myself forget that the world wouldn't be straight again till he was swinging from the end of a rope."

Afterward, Sandra wondered how she had ever gotten out of the store without being noticed. It was not only fear for Clint Blaisdell that drove her, it was something akin to horror as well—horror at the thought of what this had done to her father. Better the hopelessness and apathy than this.

She went out the back door, raced through the muddy ground to the hotel, three doors to the southward, and slipped into the back door there. The clerk did not notice her as she hurried up the stairs. She ran to the corner room, but this time no one answered her knock. She pushed open the door, but the room was empty.

Sandra ran back down the stairs. She got out the back door just as her father and the rest of the lynch mob were coming in at the front. She hurried on to the livery stable.

If Clint was not in his room, she reasoned that he must be out on the range. If he were somewhere else in town, it would be next to hopeless to find him in time anyway; but if he were out riding, she might be able to stop him from coming into town. It was her only chance.

The stableman helped her to saddle her sorrel gelding. Quickly she mounted, and headed up the gulch toward Bear Claw Valley. She turned in the saddle and looked back as she reached the outskirts of town. Down there at the Little Casino, she caught sight of her father and the others peering in through the lighted windows. They were covering the town thoroughly, and that gave her a little time.

TWILIGHT was just coming on as she entered the valley. And there, riding toward her through the dusk, was Clint Blaisdell. Her heart leaped at sight of him. She had gotten here just in time.

She hurried up to him, calling his name. He slowed his horse as she came alongside. "Why, it's Sandra Cain," he said. "It sure is." He smiled. "*Now* what do you want?"

"Clint," she said breathlessly, "Zeb Gideon was killed today."

He nodded. "I know. I saw him."

"You saw him? You mean you—Clint, did you ride out to help him?"

"Sure. Figured it might work out best that way. But before I got there, I spotted some gents carrying Zeb back. So I got off to one side and took a look, and then I rode on to see how it had happened."

"Clint, that was Tim Haywood and Jake Dunning and some others. They think they know how it happened. Because they found a lodge card with your name on it there beside Zeb's body."

He started. "A lodge card, was it?"

"That's right."

"Things do begin to fit together. That lodge card was in my money belt the other day."

"Oh."

He nudged his horse. "I reckon I'd better get into town and straighten this out."

Sandra started after him. "Clint, you can't go into town. There's a lynch mob looking for you."

He kept on riding. "I've handled lynch mobs before."

"But—there'll be killing."

"Not if they keep out of my way there won't."

"But they won't. Clint, my father's leading them. He's—gone insane. Nothing can stop him.

He turned in the saddle. "Sandra," he said, "I'll do the best I can—but hiding out won't help things any. I've got to get to the bottom of this. The only way is to show my own hand." And he spurred his horse into a trot.

SANDRA urged on her mount, brought him to within a few yards of Clint's. But following him did no good, nor any words she said. He would not stop. Perhaps he could save himself from the mob, and perhaps not—but he would never be able to do it without killing, of that she was certain. Then the hatred of the valley could never be calmed. She had to stop him.

A little ahead, the trail curved sharply, leading down into the gulch. Clint was not looking back. A long time ago, Zeb Gideon had taught Sandra how to rope, and taught her well. She always carried a lariat in her saddle.

Slowly, carefully, she shook out the loop, swung it over her head. She let it go. Silently, it settled over Clint's head.

She pulled the loop taught, pinioning his arms about him. At the same time, she urged her horse on so that Clint would not be thrown. Holding the rope tightly, she rode up to him.

He was struggling to free an arm, but he had not yet succeeded. He turned angrily. "Confound it—" he began.

"Clint," Sandra said, "you're not riding into town."

He laughed harshly. "It'll take more than a rope to hold me," he told her.

That was as far as he got. It could not have happened more smoothly if it had been prearranged. For at that moment, around the curve in the trail rode a dozen shadowy figures, half of them with drawn guns. In the lead were her father and Tim Haywood.

WHY, IT'S Sandra," Tim said. "And she's got him!"

"Thanks, Sandra," her father said. "We'd expected a little shooting."

While Sandra stood horror-struck, they surrounded Clint, lifted the gun from his hoster. When his hands were tied behind him, they tossed back the loop to her. Clint looked at her, fury in his eyes.

"Now this," he said, "reminds me of something happened a couple of days ago. Kind of a Delilah, ain't you?"

"Clint," Sandra began, "I didn't—"

"You can talk all you want to now," John Cain interrupted, "but it won't be for long. There's a cottonwood just a hundred rods up the creek that I've got in mind."

Clint said nothing, and it was a silent ride for the most part to the cottonwood. Once John Cain said: "Sandra, you go back. This is no place for you."

Sandra's mouth felt dry and her heart was pounding. "Who caught him?" she asked in answer. And she kept on riding.

It was quite dark here in the narrow end of the valley, by the time they reached the cottonwood. Jake Dunning made a noose and they swung it over a limb and put it around Clint's neck. They yanked his feet out of the stirrups, and Dunning took out his quirt to slash Clint's horse over the rump. But John Cain held up his hand.

"It's customary to give a man a chance to talk," he said. "Blaisdell, you know you're being hanged for murdering Zeb Gideon. Have you got anything you want to say?"

Clint looked around him. "Plenty," he said, his voice taut as a stretched rawhide string. "I don't tihnk it's any good talking to you gents, but I'll say it anyhow.

"In the first place, I didn't kill Zeb. I

wanted his land, but I don't operate that way. That lodge card you found—that was in a money belt that was taken off me by a gang of road agents three days ago. Sandra was with me; she can tell you that much, but I don't expect she will."

"That's true," Sandra said loudly. While Clint talked, she was edging toward him through the darkness, the knife she carried in her saddle bag in her hand.

"That don't prove anything to me," Jake Dunning growled. "Zeb said it was Blaisdell, and his word's good with me. Let's get this job done."

"Hold off on that quirt," Tim Haywood said, "and let him talk. We've got lots of time."

"I didn't kill Zeb," Clint said, "but I know the man that did. Or the man that hired it done. He wants to run this valley himself, and he told me to get out. He hired me killed the first night I got here, but it didn't work. Neither did robbing me. Then he figured an easier way to get rid of me was to get me hanged for killing Zeb. That would get Zeb out of the way too. It looks like that way would work."

With all the power she could muster, Sandra slashed at the rope that held Clint's wrists together. As it fell apart, she slipped her own forty-five into his hand.

"What kind of proof have you got?" John Cain asked.

"Shoot if you have to," Sandra whispered, "but don't kill. If you do, I'll kill you myself."

She slipped the rope from his neck. At the same time, Clint dug the spurs into his horse. His mount leaped forward, pushed through the mob.

For a moment there were yells and wild confusion. Nobody quite knew what had happened, and most of the mob had long since holstered their guns. One forty-five bellowed, and the roar of a second one all but blended with it.

The first one was Jake Dunning's, the second one Clint's. When the smoke cleared, Clint sat his horse a few yards away, facing them with his gun in his hand. Jake Dunning was cursing and holding a shattered right wrist.

"Right now," Clint said, "the best proof I've got is in my hand. Anybody else want to taste it?"

John Cain's fingers twitched, and for a moment Sandra was certain he would draw. But to her surprise, his hand went back to rest upon the pommel of his saddle. Seemingly, nobody else wanted to match guns with Clint Blaisdell, not when he already had the draw. They had heard too much about the accuracy of his gun hand, and seen a good example of it just now.

"If what you've been saying is true," John Cain said in an oddly subdued voice, "then the place to handle it is in the courts. If you're going to live here in the valley, Blaisdell, you'll have to stand trial."

Clint laughed harshly. "I've already had a taste of the valley justice, Cain. Can't say I cotton to it. I'd cotton to it less with Denver Toland bossing a rigged jury."

HIS GUN did not waver and his eyes never left them. His glance flicked back and forth so swiftly that it seemed to each one of them that both glance and gun were directed always at himself.

"But I'll tell you a few things before I go," he said. "A few things I've figured out. Denver Toland has been pulling the wool over your eyes for a long time. Even in the big days of taking out gold, he didn't bother to make his money just from his crooked tables at the little Casino. He had a gang of road agents operating for him, robbing folks of their gold on the trail. I recognized one of those gents when I was held up the other day, by his twisted left arm.

"That game petered out, and the Little Casino wasn't taking in much any more, and Toland had to find new ways to make money; but he had got a yen to be respectable lately, so they had to be hidden ways. So about that time you gents began losing cattle—just a few at a time, and it always looked like your neighbor did it, so you'd just fight each other. Toland's got a way of making his crimes look like somebody else did them.

"Another year, and he'd have been able to close up the Little Casino, start going to church and get himself elected mayor. Maybe he'd have bought up a small ranch or two. Most likely he aimed to go to Congress some day, and get to be a real, respectable power. And he didn't want me in this valley because he knew I'd find out. Well folks, I'll be riding."

John Cain moved his horse forward a little. "Where?" he asked.

"Why," Clint answered, "into town, of course. To kill Denver Toland. I can't have him running the valley any longer."

He whirled his mount, rode swiftly into the darkness.

FOR A MOMENT nobody spoke and nobody moved. Then Jake Dunning's voice cut the silence. "Damn it, who let him loose? Let's ride! We can still bring him down, between us."

"I don't know as we want to bring him down, Jake," John Cain said quietly.

Tim Haywood rode up alongside him, studied him. "This Blaisdell fooled you once, John," he said. "Is he fooling you again?"

"No, Tim," John said, "he's not." There was a quiet strength in his voice that Sandra had not heard for years, and no trace of the hysteria of the afternoon. "Clint Blaisdell never lied, not even when he ruined me. If he says he didn't kill Zeb, he didn't. That just about leaves Denver Toland, doesn't it?"

"What's that got to do with it?" piped up one of the men. "Blaisdell's run some of us out of the valley, and he still aims to take it over. We don't want him around."

"Maybe so," John Cain said, "but we want Denver Toland even less."

"I can't stand and palaver," Jake Dunning put in. "I've got a busted arm. I'm riding into town to see Doc Meadows."

"I'll ride with you, Jake," someone else said.

They rode off rapidly. John Cain ignored them. "Even Clint Blaisdell can't wipe out Toland and his gang single-handed," he said. "We've got to ride in and help him."

Tim Haywood shook his head. "I go along with you up to there, John, but no further. If Blaisdell and Toland kill each other off, that's fine with me. I don't want Blaisdell staying around here."

John Cain nodded. "But Toland may live. His hired men can kill Blaisdell, if he's got enough of them. We don't want Blaisdell here, but I'm going in to help him now. And when I'm done helping him, I'm going to order him out of the valley. If there's enough of us, we can make it stick. I think he might even go without trouble."

"Is that a promise, John?" one of the ranchers asked.

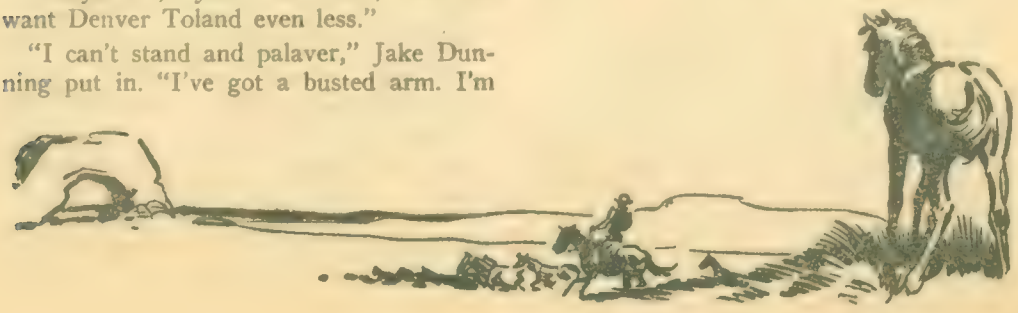
"It's a promise," Sandra's father answered, "as far as I can make it a promise right now."

"Then by heaven," the rancher said, "I'll ride with you. Maybe I'm the latest one of Blaisdell's suckers, but I'll ride."

"John," Tim Haywood declared, "when a man changes over like you have in the past quarter hour, there must be a reason. I'm with you."

"Then let's ride," John Cain said.

JAKE DUNNING and the man who rode with him did not catch up with Clint Blaisdell, although they came close. In fact, they came as close as they wanted to. They could see him ahead of them as he swung into Main Street, but



neither of them made any move to fire at him. Jake headed straight for Doc Meadows office, while the other man, Abe Sothern, headed just as directly for the Little Casino. He burst excitedly into Denver Toland's office.

The gambler frowned. "You're in too much of a hurry, Abe. I like people to knock before they come in."

"You'll be in a hurry too, in a minute," Abe told him. "Clint Blaisdell's on his way here to kill you. He just stopped at the hotel."

Toland's dark face paled. "We'll have to stop that."

"That ain't all," Abe said. "I rode with the lynch gang like you said. Somehow he got loose. I think Sandra Cain helped him. Then he turned on us and give us a talking to. He told those gents just about everything you'd been up to in the past ten years."

Denver Toland sat very still, but the knuckles of his hands were white upon the desk. "Told them—everything, did he? Did he offer any proof?"

"No. But I'm afraid a lot of them believed him."

"He can't harm me much without proof," Toland said. "But we'll have to kill him, of course. Blaisdell likes to work alone. He's going to work alone for the last time. We can trap him very neatly. Abe, get the rest of the boys up here. Quickly."

A few moments later, Denver Toland's plans were laid, and he sat down alone behind his desk, apparently at ease. The thought of death did not worry him much, for he believed his men would kill Clint Blaisdell before the latter reached him; it was the thought of disgrace that worried him.

But they could prove nothing, and with Clint Blaisdell dead the talk might die down in time. But it would take a long time. It would take years to build up again what it seemed as if he had spent half his lifetime in building, and he could never quite succeed. Another year and he would have had enough money ahead to cut off all his ties with gunmen and cattle thieves. Another year and he could have abolished the last trace of the orphaned kid who had started his career as a swamper in a cheap gold-town dive. Another year and people would have said as he passed: "That's Denver Toland, one of our best citizens. Used to go in for gambling a little, but that was in the rough days. Now he's a pillar of the church. Why, we're fixing to run him for governor next year. Think he'll get it, too."

Denver Toland sat amongst the ruins of his shattered dreams, and his thoughts and his eyes were bitter. Clint Blaisdell had had a hard beginning too; why had the luck run a little better with him all the way? Maybe Blaisdell had never quite gone outside the law in rising to the top, but he had used rough methods just the same. Blaisdell had never given a tinker's damn about respectability, and yet now he was respected more than Denver Toland could ever hope to be. People looked up to him—even when they hated him.

Even Sandra. If Abe was right, she had gone over to Blaisdell's side. Denver Toland had had thoughts of Sandra Cain, even though outwardly he had showed only friendship thus far. Sandra was a little young for his thirty-four years, he thought, so he had to move slowly; but always in his dreams of power and glory there was a place where she fitted.

He sat back, seemingly at ease. Well, for that Clint Blaisdell would have to die. It was a pity he could not kill him personally.

Down the hall, a gun blast shattered his thoughts.

CLINT BLAISDELL had stopped at his hotel only long enough to pick up an extra forty-five and make certain that he had plenty of cartridges. His own gun went into his holster; the one that Sandra had given him he thrust through his belt. He did not ordinarily carry two guns, but he figured that this time he might need them.

Sandra—she had finally come through, at the time he needed her the most. Maybe when this was over, he'd owe that gal an apology. Come to think if it, she owed him

one or two herself. But he wouldn't insist on that, and they were going to have a lot of years ahead to straighten out such little matters. He hadn't thought so much about love when Sandra first mentioned it, but he could see now that she had hit right at the heart of the matter. It was that feeling he got when he looked at her and she smiled, the feeling he had never had before, even with the prettiest girl in New York City.

Smiling, he strode out of his room and down the stairs. The hotel clerk looked up at him nervously, and Clint's smile changed to a grin.

"I'm going to kill your boss," he said, "but it's too late to get word to him—unless you've got a telegraph. Better find yourself a new job, because I'm buying this hotel in the morning."

He walked out and down the street to the Little Casino. He walked in with all his senses on the alert. A blast of sound and raucous music greeted him, but nothing else. He was a little surprised. Even more cautiously, he went up the stairs.

He reached the top, and paused. Ahead stretched an empty hallway leading to Denver Toland's office. He was more surprised. Of course, Toland probably thought he was swinging from that cottonwood by now, but just the same he had not expected quite such luck.

Better take no chances, though. It was a fair stretch down that hall. He eased his forty-five from its holster, started slowly and quietly down the hall. Halfway down, as a measure of caution, he paused and turned swiftly on the balls of his feet for a quick look backward.

Perhaps that turn saved his life. Clint did not know it, but just as he turned he had crossed an invisible deadline. On the instant, every one of those doors behind him opened and the barrels of several forty-fives thrust out.

Lead and flame from half a dozen guns blasted out at him, and the hall rocked with the roaring sound. Lead spattered into the walls about him and tugged at his clothing, and some of it thudded into his flesh. But the man who had been best in line to kill him was dead, for Clint himself had slammed a bullet through the door even as the other's gun barrel came into view. The man clutched at the door handle and pulled open the door as he fell back into the room, dead.

THE DOORWAY to Denver Toland's office—it wasn't far now. Could he hope to make it? He was wounded; he didn't quite know where, but he knew it was a bad one. He felt a little sick and dizzy.

Fill the guns full. Eleven bullets to blast away, one bullet for Denver Toland. He had to get to Toland.

Mustering all his waning strength, Clint came out of the doorway like a leaping tiger. The first leap carried him halfway to the door. He went sideways, firing alternately to front and rear as he went.

Lead slammed into his thigh and he staggered, came to his feet with an effort. He was in front of Toland's door now. That might be locked and he could not wait to find out now. Balancing on his good leg, he smashed against the door with all the power he had left. The door shattered and gave way.

Denver Toland was standing behind his desk, a gun in either hand. "So," he said, "you made it after all." And as he spoke, he fired.

He never spoke again. His lead bit into the crown of Clint's sombrero. It was a little high, because Clint's first bullet had entered his heart and driven him back. The second went between his eyes. He sprawled backward against the windowsill, then slipped slowly to the floor.

Clint pushed the shattered door closed and sat down, fighting off the rising waves of nausea. It was very quiet all around him now, even out there in the hall. They were waiting for the tally. He reloaded both his guns.

A pity he had to go back the way he had come. He didn't think he could quite make it this time; he wasn't up to his best. But it had to be that way. If he stayed here long he would faint, and if he tried to slide down a rope from the window to the street, they would get him on the way down.

Strangely, he thought about Sandra. He had finished Denver Toland, but he sure would have liked to go on living himself.

He stood up, testing his legs. Yes, he could keep his feet a little longer—long enough to make the walk, if it weren't for the interference. Pushing the door open wide, he stepped out into the hall.

A door opened slowly, just a tiny crack. Clint flung a shot at it. Two more doors opened, and the lead began to fly again.

But suddenly, the lead was not coming his way any more, and those who could close their doors were closing them and locking them. And coming down the hall toward him, with guns drawn and aimed at the doorways, strode John Cain and Tim Haywood and half a dozen other men.

The guns stopped altogether. A few of Toland's men came out with their hands in the air; a few others went out the windows and started hunting fast horses. John Cain came up and put his hand on Clint's shoulder.

"You need a hand, boy?" he asked.

Clint smiled at the paternal note. "I can make it to the stairs," he said. "But you sure got here just in time. I finished Toland, anyhow."

"Good." They walked to the stairs, side by side. Just a few steps below, Sandra stood waiting, a questioning half-smile upon her lips. Clint reached the top step and paused, looked around him.

"I sure want to thank you gents," he said. "I reckon you'll make good neighbors after all."

An odd silence fell. Finally John Cain broke it. "Clint," he said gently, "you're bad hurt. We've got Doc Meadows here to fix you up. I'll take you home, and Sandra will nurse you through. But you see, it's not a question of neighbors. If we're going to take care of you, you've got to promise to leave the valley when you're well. That's part of the bargain."

Clint stiffened and his eyes flashed angrily. He looked around at the ring of hostile faces.

"I'll nurse myself and be damned to you!" he cried. "I like it here, and I aim to stay."

"But you see," John Cain said, "we don't want a man here who rides alone. We don't want a man who tricks other people out of their land and hogs it all himself. You're not the kind of a man for this valley."

Clint looked around him again. He bit his lips from the pain of his wounds, and when he spoke his voice was very quiet.

"I've learned my lesson," he said. "A man can't ride alone and still have the girl he wants. There's a girl here I want mighty bad, and she belongs in the valley, and if she'll have me, that's where we stay. Any man here that feels he was tricked out of his land, he can have it back. The land I bought for good money, I'll keep. I need some room, but that'll do me."

For a moment he did not speak at all, and when he did go on it was with an effort. "I'm not Clint Blaisdell any more," he said. "I'm just—a cowpoke that came up the hard way." And with those words, he toppled forward.

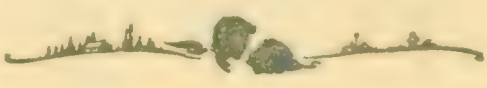
SANDRA caught him as he fell, but in an instant Doc Meadows was beside her, tearing away Clint's clothing, probing for his wounds. He was quite a while examining Clint, but finally he nodded.

"Let's get him over to my office," he said. "He'll live. For my money he can live here. He'd make a good man for the valley now."

John Cain looked unhappily at his neighbors. "What Doc Meadows said," he told them, "are my sentiments too. But I made a promise, and I'll stick to it."

Tim Haywood shook his head. "You needn't, John," he said gruffly. "I've just learned a thing or two myself. Clint's just a kid, you know. He's on the right track now." He looked around, half defiantly. "Anybody else got any objections to Clint Blaisdell staying in the valley?"

Seemingly, nobody had. Several of the men moved forward to raise Clint and carry him to Doc Meadows'; Sandra walked beside them, a little smile on her face.



DOUGHBELLY PRICE

# Breakin' the Broncs

## As told to S. Omar Barker by Doughbelly Price

*The teller of this tale, a rodeo rider way back yonder, gives the step-by-step lowdown on gentling a colt*

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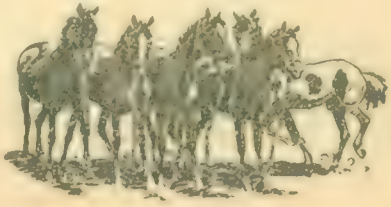
THERE'S a heap of difference between the bronc-rider you see flapping his chaps at the rodeo and the horse-breaker on a cow ranch. They *could* both be the same cowboy, and in the old days often was, but the two jobs are as different as sugar and salt. I know, because back in the days when I was getting used to my party nickname, I managed to make a fair hand at both.

In the spring I used to draw wages from several big cow outfits in New Mexico and Arizona for breaking young horses, then sack my saddle when summer come and hit the rodeo trail. I win some money in bronc-riding contests all over the country, including the championship of the Southwest at the old Cowboy's Reunion in Las Vegas, New Mexico. I ain't of a size to brag without a box to stand on. I'm just explaining howcome I claim to know a few first hand facts about broncs.

***Pick up the front feet and throw him***

Way back yonder when hell was frosty and the jackrabbits still wore horns, maybe it was the practice of some bronc-peelers to saddle and straddle at first roping—and get plumb disappointed if the colt didn't buck—but even then the best horse-breakers knowed that gentle handling was the best way to make a cowhorse. By 30 years ago the handle-'em-kind method had become purty standard. So here is the routine of some of the best horse-breakers I have known, and some of the reasons for it.

When a man throws his bed in the bunkhouse some Monday morning to take over a horse-breaking job, the first thing he does



***Leave a rope on his hackamore***

is throw the string into the corral and take time to look 'em over. He can purt' near tell which ones are liable to give trouble as well as them that won't never make good cowhorses even after they're broke. He looks for good heads, eyes that watch everything goin' on, well muscled horses with good shoulders, heads up, ears alert. This kind may give you trouble at first, but once you get him to savvy, you've got you a horse.

The ones that stand droop-headed like they don't give a damn may turn out bad to bust, and you still ain't got much of a horse.

With a quick loop you pick up the front feet of a high-steppin' bay, set back on the rope and throw him—hard. Right there is all the rough stuff the bronc should ever need. Before he's got time to ketch his wind, you slip a hackamore on his head. You work him into a corral by himself, leaving a rope on his hackamore that will drag at least two free on the ground, and shake out your loop for another one. When you've got five or six fixed thisaway, you've got your week's work cut out.

The purpose of that drag rope is to get his nose a little sore. He learns quick that when he steps on the rope the hackamore pulls on his nose, and when he backs up the pull slackens. Already he's learning to respect a rope, and the cowboy hasn't had to shed any sweat yet.

Your next step is to stretch a big stout rope, with a pull-spring at one end, between two good solid posts and tie your young students to it. Such a rope hitch-pole has enough give that it won't pull a horse's head down or cause him to break his neck if he tries to fight it, and he soon learns that stepping forward will loosen the hackamore on his tender nose. Your bronc is getting his first lesson in learning to lead—and still no work on the cowboy!

I've had as many as six raw broncs tied up that way on each side of the same rope, pulling and tugging against each other, while I just set in the shade smokin' an' takin' it easy, maybe studyin' on some purty gal I met last time in Taos.

Come evening you give 'em all a good feed to let 'em know you're their friend, and

***Tie students to a rope hitch-pole***

turn 'em loose in a corral, leaving the lead rope on to keep their noses tender and save repeating the rough stuff.

Tuesday morning you tie your young broncs to the spring rope, same as before. Then you take one off, snub him up secure, and tie up a hind foot. This is done by looping a cotton rope around his neck close to the shoulders, slipping the free end between his hind legs, then back through the loose loop at the shoulders, pulling up the slack so as to catch one hind foot and raise it off the ground.

Oh, the bronc will object and act up nervous, but it's a heap better for him to get nervous than you.

Now you saddle and unsaddle him over and over till the young'un will stand purty good. Then you start getting on and off of him till that don't worry him either. With

***Come evening let 'em have a good feed***

that foot tied up he can't buck. If he r'ars around and throws himself, it's a likely sign that you ain't handled him quiet and steady enough.

All six soakin' with a foot up at the same time saves time on the work. While you're working with one, the others have got time to think it over.

You don't have to kiss a bronc to persuade him you're his friend, but just be quiet and kind with him and no rough stuff no matter what he does, because he's just

a new beginner and don't know. Your job is to learn him. There may be a time for rough stuff after he knows better and still maybe tries out a few little tricks like jumping away or trying to kick you when you go to mount. Then the cowboy has got to punish him some to remind him who is boss.

*Tie up a hind foot*

SO NOW you leave the youngsters draggin' their lead ropes in the corral with a good feed in their bellies, maybe sore and discouraged but already a heap wiser than when they started. The next few days you will see them looking to you for that feed, with more and more confidence that as long as they do what you want, you don't aim to hurt them. Only bear in mind that the horse-breaker has got to know more than the horse!

Come Wednesday morning the cowboy still ain't done no work to speak of, but from now on he may shed a little sweat. First you tie up those feet and go over all that saddling and getting on and off again, just in case they've forgot. Then you let that hind foot down for the first time with a saddle on, and stand back to watch the show. Remember this is only the third day this youngster has been to school, and don't be surprised if he uncorks some action to try and shed that kack. The main thing is to have that saddle laced on him so it can't come off. For if he bucks it off at that stage, you've got the first makin's of a spoilt horse that will have to have it took out of him later on. If it stays on, a smart horse learns mighty quick that he's wastin' his time and muscle.

Well, now you are about ready to start riding the stock. The salty idea some peelers used to have that you got to throw a bronc, cinch the hull on him, git on and start rakin' the hell out of him with sharp spurs as he gits up, is all wrong. If a man that called himself a horse-breaker was to come into a corral of mine and pour out of his saddle sack a Mexkin spade bit, sharp-roweled spurs and a big heavy quirt, I wouldn't fire him—I'd just unlimber my ol' six-times pistol and put him out of his misery. For he don't know as much as the horses he's been hired to teach.

So you put the whole string through it all again. Let the foot down and let them have it out with the old saddle if they want to, and get to sweating good. Then pick out the one you think is the toughest, tie his foot up again and put your favorite bronc-bustin' saddle on him. Mind you, he has never yet had a bridle on nor a bit in his mouth, and won't have for some time to come. Just a hackamore. Now you take the lead rope off and tie on a pair of them short hackamore reins. These will be the bronc's guiding hand for some time.

With these reins in hand, gently but firmly catch the noseband of the hackamore, pulling the bronc's head to you so if he jumps or tries to kick as you start to step across, you'll have the best of it. That's what a bronc-rider can't never afford to for-

*Saddle and unsaddle over and over*

get: Never let the bronc catch you at a disadvantage, and never let anything he does surprise you.

With this holt on the hackamore, you git your foot in the stirrup and swing into the big middle of him, easy and quiet, but not too slow. What happens next is the test of how good the schooling of the past few days

*Start getting on and off*

has been. If you've been a good teacher and start off gentle, the bet is ten to one your student bronc will move out trying to do just as near what you want as he knows how. For you have done taught him that the saddle is a pack it's no use to try and shed.

Of course, if he does buck, your job is to ride him, let him know who's the boss without boogering him any more than you can help. If he don't buck, or when he gits through, you give him a brief lesson in obeying the pull of the reins. His nose, which is a mighty tender spot on a horse, is still sore. He soon learns that if he turns the way you pull, that sore nose gets relief.

YOU go through the line-up thisaway, giving each bronc about an hour, and you have put in a good day that will remain a memory in the mind of the horse the rest of his life. One bad slip that day might mean trouble for the cowboy that will ride this horse long after you've moved on to another string.

That's the sure-as-shootin' truth for the next day, too. Tying up the foot again won't hurt, and it may help plenty, just to remind the bronc who's still in control. This time you ride him around the corral, reining him gently but firmly this way and that. But don't ever figger you can learn him all about them reins in one day. That's going to take months. Let him have his way some at first because a horse has got a head on him, and some of them like to use it.

A gentle kick in the side as you rein him will help, but by my way of doin', no spurs yet. Spurs are made to punish and control with after a horse has graduated to the college of cow work, and no cowboy ever needs them sharp. If you need a quirt, get a wide strap of leather that will produce more noise than pain and just spat him with it.

When you step into the corral Friday morning you won't find your students even scared of you any more. They may be sore in their muscles some, but wiser a-plenty in the head.

Well, you catch them one by one and tie them up to the big spring rope again. Take your first off the line and go right through the same old rigamarole. Let him have his chance to buck with the saddle again if he wants to, then check him again the same way and climb on. After a turn or two in the corral, let somebody throw open the gate and turn you out in the open.

Now he may want to run, which don't

*Let that hind foot down and watch*

hurt nothing, because your pull on them hackamore reins keeps reminding him how sore his nose is, and purty quick you've got him under control. Don't try to ride him way off yonder this time. Just meander him around for about an hour and come back to the corral after the next one and do the same with him.

Come Saturday and you do it all over again, and since there generally ain't no day of rest on a cow ranch, the same again on Sunday. Sunday or Monday winds up your job with this string. But don't think you've got cowhorses yet. You've just learned them their first lesson, get them ready to turn over to cowhands that will go on and learn them to be cowhorses. Some horses,

*If you've been a good teacher. . . .*

after the second or third time after cattle, will "go to lookin' at a cow," as the cowboys say. But some never do get to be good cowhorses, just like some cowboys never do make cowhands.

Each cowboy on the ranch will get one or two of these saddle-broke broncs in with his regular string of older horses, and come a day when there is a short ride to make and no snaky cow work, you will hear the boss say, "Boys, you can ride your young stock today." Then it won't be long till the bronc you worked the wildness out of with kindness, patience and the ability to ride him if you had to, is taking over the work of some of the older horses that are beginning to wear out.

Maybe you named these broncs while breaking them, and even got kinder fond of them, and sometime when you drop in on that ranch again, it might even look like some of them half remember you—as a friend.

WELL, rodeo bronc-riding is different. Rodeo broncs ain't well-meaning colts boogered by fear. They're mostly mature horses that have been spoilt by mishandling or poor riders, or maybe just mean by nature. Some cowpoke lets a horse slip the pack on a cold morning and don't take it out of him, till the horse gets the idea that if he unloads his rider, his day's work is done.

Ol' Crazy Snake, one of the toughest broncs that ever dusted out of a rodeo arena, had been so gentle that kids rode him to school. Then one morning something went wrong, and he up and done it. From then on he was a bucker—and a good one. Gentle to handle, but how he could buck! I was a fair bronc-rider in my day, but ol' Crazy Snake sent me after gravel 61 times before I ever made a ride on him.

Well, you enter a rodeo contest, and you draw your bronc's number out of a hat. He's got to be a sure-'nough bucker or you can't prove you're a bronc-rider on him, no matter how you come out of the chute with the spurs in his shoulders, scratch till the hair flies, three jumps forward then high behind till the whistle blows, all according to the rules. If he bucks a good job, that ten seconds seems a mighty long time—during every gut-jolting second of which you've not only got to show you're master of the situation, but make it look easy and graceful.

A ranch horse-breaker aims to learn a horse to do work. A rodeo rider wants the horse to buck his best so he can show his ridin'—and get to hell off as soon as the whistle blows.

As rodeo bronc-riders my ol' bent hat is off to 'em, but when it comes to cattle ranch work, I've knowed several top rodeo men that still don't know whether cows roost in the tops of trees or sleep on the ground!

*Now he may want to run*

*WHEN A MAN has always ridden*

*tall in the saddle it's hard*

*to switch to the law's far side*

*A savagely chopped pistol barrel aimed at his head*

# Burned-Out Range

***By Frank P. Castle***

TOM DOBIE looked at his stiff new levis and the limp, shelf-wrinkled shirt which was as close to his size as the stock of Solomon Izler's store in Newhall afforded. Maybe, he thought, if he kept the levi cuffs well down, his cracked, worn boots wouldn't be noticed. He had denied himself everything else, but he had to have new clothes of some kind to wear tonight.

From the fob pocket in his discarded saddle pants he brought out a tightly folded bill. Tom smiled at Izler, extending the money.

"Ought to have enough change due for a good cigar, Sol," he said, wishing regretfully he could have replaced his floppy ruin of a hat, also.

The kindly old merchant blinked thoughtfully, probably guessing this was all the money Dobie had in the world.

"Your credit's good, boy," he protested. "No need to pay cash."

Tom was tempted. He could spend the money on refreshments for Jeannette Corwith tonight. Then he shook his head.

"You know I came to town for the dance and to see Milt Ashburn," he said. "Until my talk with Milt, I'm the worst credit risk in all this burned-out county. Give me the cigar."

Izler nodded, turning away with the worried frown he had worn for months. He had been hard hit by the drought, too, Tom remembered. Everybody in the county had been. But nobody had taken quite the wallop aimed at the tall, lean man reflected in the store mirror.

Tom Dobie was almost a stranger to himself, with new grey at his temples and new lines in his face. Izler could cinch his belt tighter and wait for better times. So could Ashburn, the banker, and old Bob Magrider, and the other ranchers in the basin. But not Tom Dobie, struggling to hold a thousand acres up on the bench, with a note due at the bank and not a dime to his name.

Lighting the cigar, he walked along Front Street. Music already came from the lodge hall over Kemp's Store, where the dance would be held. The feel of clean new clothes was good, as was the taste of tobacco after months of doing without while he pinched every penny.

A HOT BREEZE whirled dust devils along the street. Up around the San Francisquito peaks, west of town, lightning flickered. Clouds were massed there, as they had been for weeks; clouds and lightning and the growl of thunder, but never a drop of rain.

Turning onto Prairie Street, stopping before Bob Blanchard's saloon, Tom saw a light on the porch of the Ashburn house, a big residence back of a white picket fence across the street and down at the next corner. He saw a livery surrey roll up Ashburn's drive; then Steve, the banker's son, handsome in a new broadcloth suit, stepped out and hurried around the vehicle to offer his hand to Jeannette Corwith.

Tom grunted. She wore a filmy pink dress tonight. He suddenly saw her paired

with him and his stiff new levis, cracked boots and wrinkled shirt. She was going into the house. A party there before the dance, Tom thought, with Steve attentively beside her. The cigar had turned bitter. He threw it into the street and went through Blanchard's doors.

Ashburn was at the bar, near the front, in accordance with his fixed habit at this hour, talking quietly to Blanchard himself and several others. He wore a strained, irritable expression, shared by everyone in varying degrees throughout the county. Those near him pulled away a little. They knew about Dobie's bank note, due tomorrow.

"No use waiting till morning, Milt," Tom said steadily.

"Boy, you ought to have your fun tonight—enjoy the dance," Ashburn growled. "Tomorrow at the bank is soon enough to talk."

"Nothing will change before then. You going to extend my note?"

"Tom, I can't. The bank's position isn't good. I'm over-extended on loans. This dry spell has drained my cash reserves. I've got to build them up."

"One soaking rain would pull me through, Milt," Tom Dobie said. "I'd have knee-high grass in a month. And with the feeder stock I could pick up then, I'd pay the note by fall."

"A good rain would get us all clear," Ashburn said wearily. "And you know it'd take a miracle to produce one this late in the spring. Damn it, Tom, if I could carry your personally I would, but I'm no better off than anyone else. I'll have to take over and auction your holding for what it'll bring."

It would go cheap. Someone would make a big profit when the rains inevitably came again. Tom thought of this while talk went on about him. Worried talk about the drought, and speculations concerning pairings for the dance tonight, and something about Marshal Ed Wicker reporting several strange men in town; he had warned them of Newhall law against wearing guns and they had readily surrendered theirs.

Dobie saw Bob Magrider standing just beyond Ashburn, and nodded to the man who had hired him at top-saddle pay for four years and who had helped him stock the bench when he broke away on his own.

"Think I'll ride out and see you tomorrow, Bob," he said.

The grizzled old rancher avoided his gaze.

"You won't like what you'll see, boy. I'm carrying only three riders on payroll, and two who're working for board. I've shipped out everything but some breeders. Unless we get rain soon, I've got to do more firing."

Tom felt the numbness of shock. He had been absorbed in his own place, lately; he hadn't known it had got this bad. He had always thought he could count on a job with Magrider, if necessary. And he knew the old man had just told him indirectly this wasn't true.

"Have a drink, Tom," Ashburn invited.

He shook his head stiffly. He wouldn't drink when he couldn't buy in return.

"Have it on the house, boy," Blanchard offered hastily. "You can't go to the dance without one."

Pushing through the doors, he didn't reply.

TOM LOOKED at the dried bed of Newhall Creek, thinking of the many times he had carelessly splashed across the ford, taking it for granted water would always run here. Now there was nothing but dust and sun-cracked mud. He had come here hoping desperately to find some evidence of rain in the hills. There was none. The breeze had vanished and it was hotter. Lightning flashed strongly in the western sky. He turned back toward town.

This was the dead end a man felt sure in his heart he would never have to face, no matter how tough things got. If Magrider didn't have a job for him, neither did anyone else. Tom supposed he'd have to roll his few possessions in a blanket, tie it behind the saddle, and drift. Hit the grubline trail, with plenty of good men for company. He had steeled himself for the

possibility it might be bad for him—but not as bad as this.

Blanchard had closed up until the dance was over, but a lamp burned in his window. Tom was passing it when he heard his name called. He looked around and saw Jeannette Corwith coming from the Ashburn house, with Steve behind her.

"Tom!" she said. "I heard you were in town, and hoped I'd see you before getting into the crowd at the hall. I'm saving you some dances. I—I thought it was what you'd want."

"Not the grand march and the first

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## Tough Hombre

### By PHIL SQUIRES

*Them cowboy old-timers was sure plenty tough!*
*I remember one time on the Pecos*
*That we thought Booger Johnson was finished sure 'nough,*
*When his head got chopped off in a fracas.*

*But next day we met Booger ridin' to town*
*Plumb early, along about dawn,*
*To see if he couldn't find ol' Dr. Brown*
*An' git him to sew it back on!*

---

one!" Steve Ashburn snapped. "She's already promised those to me."

Dobie felt his muscles tense. Then he made himself relax. His luck wasn't this boy's fault.

The girl was very pretty tonight. Her brown hair was upswept glossily on her head. She wore elbow-length gloves and carried a fan. Her full skirt, lifted from the walk with both hands, revealed dancing slippers with pink bows to match her dress.

Jeannette Corwith taught the first three grades in the town school. Few teachers stayed on the job long before marriage; it was evident from the first she wouldn't remain single longer than the school term of her contract.

County gossip had agreed that Tom Dobie was well out in front of those trying for her favor. He had thought so himself. He had planned to put a new house on his place, grade a lane down to the county road, acquire a team and buggy. He had proved to himself, at night in his lonely shack, figuring slowly and carefully by the light of a smoky lamp, that he could swing it. That had been before the fall rains had failed to materialize.

"Sure," he told her woodenly. "Save me some dances. You better hurry, now; it's about to start. I'll be along later. I've got some business to attend to."

She frowned, puzzled. The girl must have been wondering about him lately—why he hadn't come to see her and asked for her company tonight. A girl couldn't go to the dance unescorted. She might have preferred his company to Steve Ashburn's.

It was too late to tell her about the strain he'd been under—the days of watching those clouds above the San Francisquitos for a break in the weather, always staying close to his place so he could take full advantage of a shower if it did come. He had planned to dance with her tonight—a lot of dances. He had figured that, if necessary, he would ask what she might think of a man who might have to work a year or so for Bob Magrider to get his feet on the ground again. Now he wouldn't say anything more to her. No girl could be expected to wait on a saddle bum with no prospects at all.

IT WAS best this way—make her think he'd be along presently, and let her walk away with this boy. Steve was sure of a job in his dad's bank. He was soft and callow, maybe, but he didn't have rope scars on his hands, grey in his hair and seams in his face. He didn't walk with a slight limp, memento of an outlaw bronc that had rolled on Tom five years ago.

Jeannette would live here in town, as Steve's wife, not in a lonely house up on the bench. She'd know ease and comfort Tom couldn't give her for a long while yet, even if everything had gone right.

She was still standing before him, the frown gone and a pleading look in her eyes, but he remained silent. She'd soon hear about what had happened to him, and she'd understand. Probably be thankful it hadn't gone any farther between them, too.

Steve took her arm, with a wide grin of triumph. Being in the bank, he must have heard already of Tom Dobie's ruin—must know that he could win the girl now by default. He was swaggering as he walked her up to the corner. Jeannette looked back, and Tom stared down at the walk. He didn't want to see her again.

His big hands closed convulsively. It was hell to be beaten without a chance to fight back.

He angled across the street from Blanchard's to the hotel, passed it, and crossed the alley between the hotel and Ashburn's bank, a solid structure at the corner of Main Street. A night lamp burned inside and Tom saw Mitch Larsen, who was Ashburn's handy man, hurrying his clean-up chores. Like everybody else in town, he wanted to go to the dance.

Tom went on for another block, and stopped across the street from Kemp's Store. The grand march music came through opened upstairs windows. Everybody was there; he saw no loiterers on the walk outside of Kemp's, and not a soul in sight along the street. This monthly dance was a big event—a way of forgetting now, for a few hours, the merciless drought.

It would be hot upstairs, but nobody would mind. There would be lemonade at the refreshment stand and beer in tubs of cool well water—the girls would drink it from cups, giggling as it tickled their noses, while the older women frowned.

He moved on and came to his objective—the squat building which served as marshal's office and jail. The front door was open, so that late-comers could leave their guns on the big rack inside, just as Tom had checked his earlier in the evening. Lifting down his plain belt, supporting a worn old holster and the heavy Colt he had carried for fifteen years, he looked at the rack's crowded pegs, and suddenly everything seemed to come together in his bitter thoughts, focusing on a possibility which must have been at the back of his mind ever since Ashburn had turned him down.

Tom considered it, frowning, hand tight on the rough grip of his weapon. He had never been tempted to put a crooked loop in his rope. He had always dealt squarely with others, and had been handled squarely in return. But now it was different. He had been hammered flat through no fault of his own, and the town had refused to help him up.

Ashburn's bank had a door opening on the alley, with a lock which could be blasted off with no more than two shots from a Colt. And it was common knowledge that Steve, who functioned in the teller's cage and who liked to sleep late, was in the habit of locking a sizeable packet of bills in the drawer under his counter to handle the morning's first rush of business, instead of putting it away in the safe.

Tom looked at the gun rack. Every readily available weapon in town had been checked here.

IT WAS surprising how many secret habits a man learned when he had been long familiar with a town and knew well most of those in it. Marshal Ed Wicker kept the keys to his cells—which were seldom occupied—on a hook under his desk. Tom brought them out and started carrying guns to the back of the jail. He dumped all of them into a cell's far corner and locked the door. Going out again, he threw the keys out into the weed patches of a vacant lot. He'd be long gone before enough weapons could be found to arm a pursuing posse.

He went at a long stride back along the street, telling himself he should make a good haul. This was Friday night; with everybody in town, there'd be brisk business tomorrow morning. And Steve would undoubtedly have planned to sleep as late as

possible after the dance. Money was waiting for the taking. Money due Tom Dobie as his payment for what the town had done to him.

He passed Kemp's Store again. Noise from the dance filled the silent street. Tom saw Mitch Larsen hurrying up the stairs. The way was clear for him. Ten minutes of fast work should be enough, now. He had left his horse back of the hotel, not more than a hundred feet from the bank's side door.

Then his steps lagged. He cursed himself for a fool, knowing at once what held him back.

A man, he was discovering, couldn't walk a straight path all his life and then turn abruptly aside from it as a result of a momentary bitter impulse. It would be satisfying to have a thick packet of bank cash so that he needen't ride away from his failure here empty-handed.

But he was remembering the look on Ashburn's face when the banker told him his note couldn't be extended. Ashburn, he belatedly acknowledged, hadn't taken pleasure from it. He was remembering what Bob Magrider had said, and realizing how it must have hurt the old man to have to say it. And he was remembering, also that Solomon Izler had offered him credit, when he was carrying more than half the county on his books with no hope of payment until the rains came again.

These were things belatedly recalled, to alter a picture he had hastily constructed out of anger and self-pity. Yet he had to go on—he had started something he couldn't back-track from now. Those guns were locked in a jail cell and its key thrown away. When they were discovered, Steve Ashburn would remember Tom Dobie lingering on the street when the rest of the town was pouring upstairs to the dance.

Running footsteps tapped lightly on the walk behind him. He swung around, hand dipping to his gun, and then lifted it again hurriedly. His throat was suddenly tight.

An oppressive blackness was over the town, and the lightning was coming nearer. By its glare, he had seen Jeannette. She placed a gloved, quivering hand on his arm.

"I saw you from the window, Tom, going by. And the look on your face frightened me."

"You should have stayed with Steve, girl," he said. "He's a good boy, and he's got a bright future."

She caught her breath angrily.

"So that's what you're thinking! Steve's a boy, yes! If I was looking for that kind, or handsome clothes, I couldn't do better. But I—I was looking for a man. Oh, I know it's not proper of me to say so; still, this is a time for me to speak what I'm thinking. We women all know we must do the pursuing, though we pretend otherwise; we know that we either get the men we want or take something second-best because we don't dare to try hard enough."

"Jeannette, listen to me—" Tom began.

"I will not! You'll do the listening. When I heard Ashburn wouldn't extend your note, when I remembered how you looked and sounded in front of Blanchard's, I knew you were getting set to do something that would hurt both of us. Tom, I know how you must feel. You've been beaten to your knees, through no fault of your own, and it galls you. But you can stand again!"

"I've got the clothes I'm wearing, and my horse," Dobie said harshly. "That's all. And nobody's hiring on this range."

"I've saved some money," Jeannette said, lifting her voice against the sound of thunder rolling near. "Not enough, probably, to save your place. But you can find good grass somewhere and make another start. They like me here. I can teach school until you can send for me."

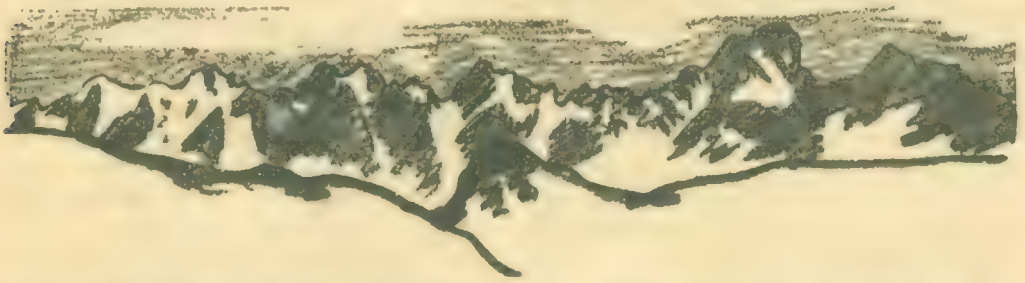
THUNDER and a rising wind drowned out the dance music. Tom swore inwardly, thinking of what was being offered him here, at a time when it was deadly dangerous for him to stand and listen to her even a minute longer. Jeannette had come to him too late.

Then he became aware of something else—of men on the other side of the street in a group together, pausing to talk this side of Kemp's and then splitting up and coming on, one holding to the walk and the other

two angling into the street. The lightning showed them leaning against the wind and walking fast, and he remembered the talk he had heard in Blanchard's of strangers here tonight.

"Please say you will, Tom," the girl begged. "I was raised in this country. I know what it is to do ranch chores. You won't find me afraid of work."

He put his arms about her and felt Jeannette come close to him. This was something he had dreamed about and he took



quick pleasure from it, lifting the girl and swinging her into a doorway, shielding her body with his.

"Quiet" he said. "Stand still for a moment—"

The strangers were riders from Ysabel, it had been guessed at Blanchard's, and they had surrendered their guns to the marshal. But their holsters were filled now, which could have only one meaning when men deserted the dance and headed toward Ashburn's bank. Someone else had heard about Steve's carelessness.

"Tom, what is it?" Jeanette begged. "Who are those men? Why are you hiding from them?" Then her voice shaded into relief. "Here comes the marshal."

Ed Wicker was coming from the other direction, which indicated he hadn't been at the dance. He was a spare, grey man whose bootheels hit the walk solidly. Tom swore under his breath as he saw the strangers stop and eye the marshal coldly. Wicker had made his reputation in the Kansas boomtowns and was efficient in his job, but three against one made murderous odds, even for him.

Tom knew suddenly in his heart that the same thing which had slowed him down when he was heading toward the bank himself, was going to send him into the fight which would inevitably break in a matter of seconds. A man couldn't escape what he was.

"Stay here!" he ordered roughly, and left the girl. Then he was across the walk in two long strides, and into the street.

He picked the nearest of the three and lunged at him. Wicker had called something about all of them being under arrest for wearing guns on the street, and one had whipped out his weapon in a startled, hurried draw. Tom saw the flash of powderflame, and an answering streak of fire from the walk, but the sounds of their explosions were lost in a roaring barrage of thunder from overhead.

The man he had picked also tried hurriedly to draw, but Tom closed on him too fast. They slammed together and went down in powdery street dust, Tom on top first, and then twisted and slammed back on his shoulders. He used his knees wickedly against the other's belly to throw him off. The almost continuous lightning showed his opponent clearing and leveling his gun from a prone position. Tom dove at him, slammed the weapon aside as it exploded, and then ground knee against wrist to break the other's grip. The gun flew aside and he locked his big hands about a fat throat, squeezing hard.

Fingers twined in his hair and jerked his head painfully back. A savagely chopped pistol barrel, aimed at his head, kissed his temple and hammered his shoulder. He pushed himself back against the man who had come up behind him and lifted both

elbows in an explosive thrust to the rear. Tom heard an agonized grunt as they hammered hard into ribs. He leaped forward and to his feet, lifting his own Colt and whirled. Again he saw powderflame without accompanying sound as the heavens seemed to crack open over his head, and pulled trigger himself. The man who had shot at him turned, took an uncertain step and pitched on his face, clutching his middle.

THEN Ed Wicker was beside him, looking thoughtfully at one man who wheezed painfully for air, still on his back, and at another who groaned feebly, hands over the hole low in his side made by Dobie's bullet.

"You hogged the big end of the fight, Tom," he said mildly. "Still, I made my shot count; there'll be need to jail only two of 'em. I should have guessed when they hit town that they gave up their irons too quick and might have others handy. Damned if I don't lay down the law to Milt Ashburn about bricking up that alley door of his and making Steve put his money in the safe! I've been keeping an eye on the bank every night there's been strangers in town, and I'm getting plumb tired of it—"

Tom grunted. He'd have walked right into the marshal's guns, then, if Jeannette hadn't stopped him. And now he had to tell her. He had to tell her what he had almost done, and then get out of town in a hurry.

The crowd was pouring from the lodge hall, and out in front was Milt Ashburn. He grabbed Tom's hand and squeezed it hard.

"I'd feel like a skunk after this if it hadn't been for a meeting we held a while ago," he said. "Me and Bob Magrider, Izler, Blanchard, Kemp, several others. All of us have been strapped for ready cash because of the drought, but we agreed the county can't afford to lose you, and that somehow we can scrape up enough to cover the bank's note and save your grass for you. You can pay us back when you're able. We were just starting out to tell you what we'd decided when all this business broke."

Tom scrubbed a hand hard along his jaw. This made it even worse for him.

"Milt, I've got to tell you something."

"It can wait!" the banker snapped, tilting his head back. "Feel that? It's rain!"

Drops were pattering into the dust. There was a roar of a storm, a big one, rolling in from the west. It was matched by the thankful roar of those on the street. Tom felt Jeanette's hand pull him, and followed her over to the walk.

"Tom Dobie," the girl said unevenly, "I'm the silliest fool alive! When I saw you from the lodge hall—your face and your hand on your gun—I had the crazy notion you were going to rob Steve's cash drawer yourself. I followed you and said the things I did because I felt nothing else could bring you to a stop. Now I know you were only going to help Ed Wicker with those three bandits. I—I really meant what I said, but what I thought and did were unforgivably presumptuous. I should have known you would never need help from anyone to stand straight and tall."

Tom stared at her. Ashburn had said it would take a miracle to bring rain, but perhaps there had been more than one miracle here tonight. He had everything he had ever wanted, now, if he was man enough to take and hold it. Suddenly he knew, beyond all doubt, that it would be harder to stay and live up to what the town and Jeannette thought he was than to blurt the truth and run. He pulled the girl close and kissed her hard, and felt humility when lightning revealed the stars in her eyes.

"I'll tell you what really happened tonight—some day when we've been married ten years or so," he said. "Now I want those dances you were saving for me."

She nodded happily. He gripped her arm tightly as they moved toward the lodge hall together. Just in case he ever had to face such a bad time again, he didn't want her any farther away from him than she was now.

*She was close, her uplifted face tender in the moonlight*

# Look to Tomorrow

**By Dorothy L. Bonar**

***THERE'S A BRIGHT future for any man who can think straight, shoot straight, and find the right gal to go straight for***

CHRIS LANDON was shaving by lamplight when he heard a horse turn into the ranch yard. That would be his brother, Ben, back from his two-day inspection of the cattle up in Cedar Basin. Chris swore as he dabbed at a trickle of blood at his chin. He had dried face and hands, and was buttoning up a clean shirt, when the other man came in.

"Going somewhere?" The tone of Ben's voice was harsh, sarcastic.

Chris turned slowly. The two men had the same tall, well knit frames, leanly padded with flesh, and well muscled. There was a strong resemblance in their faces except for the eyes. Chris' were blue and somberly thoughtful; Ben's grey and sullen.

Meeting Ben's gaze now, Chris' heart sank in anticipation of another scene. In an effort to ward it off, he said, "I finished that line of new fence today, Ben. All set to start on the second one in the morning. Got the wagon loaded with posts already, and—"

"You figuring on going to that dance in Tiptop tonight?"

The blunt interruption silenced Chris briefly. Then he said, "Yes, Ben." Impulsively he added, "Why don't you come too? No sense in you hanging around here alone. Besides, that telephone business is going to be explained to all the ranchers, and you should hear it."

"Not interested." With the curt refusal Ben moved to a cupboard, took down a plate and cup and helped himself to the coffee, beans and fried spuds Chris had left on the back of the stove to keep warm. Chris turned back to the mirror to comb his dark hair.

"I suppose you aim to stop at the Running W and pick up Shirley Worth?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Ben barked out a harsh laugh. "You've got the gall to ask that? You, an ex-convict?"

"Why do you taunt me like that, Ben?" Chris demanded desperately. "Why do you keep throwing the past in my face? It's finished!"

"Is it?"

"If you feel that way, why'd you pay the

lawyers and guarantee me a job to get me out?" he queried.

"You should be able to guess the answer to that," came the harsh response.

"You mean on account of Pa?"

"Yes, Pa! He never gave me a minute's rest all them years. Even after we'd moved up here, where nobody knew us, he kept after me. But he never got me pinned down until the day he died."

Chris needed to be told no more. A death-bed promise explained Ben's black moods, his mounting animosity.

"I didn't know," said Chris. "I'm sorry about it, Ben."

"You're sorry!" In a sudden passion Ben pushed back from the table so violently that his chair overturned with a crash. "I suppose that makes up for disgracing me and messing up my life! I suppose you think I'm going to forget and stand by now and watch you get married—step into everything you caused me to lose?"

Chris stared into a contorted face, and a sick feeling rose within him. All along he'd figured that he alone had paid the price of his youthful folly. Ben had been engaged to a girl in their old home town long ago. It had never occurred to him to wonder what had broken it off.

"Eloise Grant!" he said. "Did Eloise throw you over because—"

He had no chance to lift a hand to protect himself. He caught only a glimpse of Ben's livid face, of his fist slashing out. It caught the point of his chin, exploding the top of his head. A flare of red lights shot before his eyes, and then turned to black.

THE NEXT he knew he was lying on the floor. Ben was nowhere in sight.

Chris sat up, forgetting a sore jaw as he put his head down on folded arms. They had been close to each other as growing boys. There had been trust and affection between them—a warm bond he himself had broken, and which it was apparently out of his power ever to mend.

At length Chris got up, brushed himself off and put on his hat. He went out and hitched a team to the buckboard, climbed into it and drove away.

A pumpkin moon edged over the brow of a hill, its gold turning quickly to silver as it climbed the sky, blotting out stars in a wide radius. Its light picked out the numerous Running W buildings, when presently he turned into the ranch yard.

John Worth was the valley's biggest, most progressive rancher. His two-storied house was the wonder of the country, with its furnishings shipped from Kansas City, its waxed floors and piano. And now it was to have something else—a telephone.

Yes, John Worth was a progressive, broadminded man—but that was no guarantee that he'd take kindly to a man with a shady past becoming his son-in-law.

The fear that had always gnawed at Chris took a real grip upon him as he drew up at the gate of a picket fence surrounding the house. He found Shirley there, awaiting him.

"Mom and Dad went on ahead," she announced, when he climbed out of the rig and came toward her. A scent of cultivated flowers inside the fence sweetened the warm air. Yet to Chris all the fragrance and sweetness of the night had its center in this girl. She was warmth and serenity and beauty—everything for which he had starved for five long, dreary years.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Shirley," he said, "but I fenced until dark. And then I got held up a little."

"Another quarrel with Ben?" She put a soft hand on his.

When he did not answer, she went on, "He didn't want you to take me to the dance tonight, I suppose. He doesn't like you to see anything of me at all, does he? What has Ben against me all of a sudden?"

Chris hesitated, then found himself saying, "You're imagining things, honey. Ben likes you fine. He's just a little cranky lately because he's working hard. Come on, now. Let's get going before we miss all the fun."

BEING little more than a trading center connected to the railroad and county seat by a twice-a-week stage, Tiptop had less than a dozen buildings. But what it lacked in size, it made up in

enthusiasm for social functions. The dance was well in progress when Chris and Shirley pulled up in front of the brightly lighted schoolhouse. Rigs and saddle horses crowded the grounds. The air rang with the lively harmony of fiddle, accordion, and banjo.

"A polka," exclaimed Shirley, foot starting to tap.

Glancing down, Chris caught a glimpse of a dainty white slipper. He halted the horses. "I'd better let you out here at the walk," he declared, "so you don't get those pretty shoes dirty. Looks like I'll have to tie up quite a ways out."

She accepted his help over the wheel. "I'll wait for you here on the steps," she said.

Innocently she turned the balance of luck against Chris, for had she not been on hand to catch the fancy of the man who pushed his way out of the schoolhouse a moment later, the man might have continued on back to the saloon from which he had come.

But the golden-haired girl in the blue dress proved a more powerful magnet than the contents of any bottle. The man stopped, and he was still there when Chris came along moments later. In the murky light of a lantern hanging over the door, Chris saw the girl pulling back from a hand on her arm. He heard her voice lift.

"For the last time, my answer is no. I came with someone and my first dance is his. Besides, I don't know you."

"Shucks! That can be fixed up, dearie. My handle's Jed Snell."

The name seemed to explode in Chris' ears, drowning out further sound of the familiar voice. Jed Snell! A crawling started inside Chris' stomach and spread through him, rousing him to start to turn away in a wild impulse toward flight. One boot crunched into the edge of the graveled walk leading to the veranda steps. At the sound Shirley turned swiftly.

"Chris!" The relief in her voice even more than the fact that he had been seen, effectively blocked escape. He moved forward, flinching inwardly as the light hit his face.

"Well, I'll be—" With the unfinished exclamation, Snell pushed his hat to the back of his head, revealing reddish curly hair and a narrow face that caused a searing memory picture to leap starkly before Chris' eyes. He saw that face twisted, one eye closed, the other sighting along a rifle barrel. He saw a puff of smoke . . . a stage driver tumbling from the high seat of his coach. . . .

Desperately he moistened his lips to speak and was unexpectedly spared the effort.

Snell stepped back. "I was just coaxing the little lady for a dance," he said apologetically. "I guess I made a mistake. No offense meant, mister."

Tipping his hat to Shirley, he sidled down the steps, turned, and disappeared into the night. Chris stared after him, blood pounding at his temples.

"Do you know that man?"

The question brought him up sharply. "No, I've never seen him before. What makes you ask?"

Wide, grave eyes probed his. "There seemed to be something strange in the way you looked at each other." Then, when he didn't speak, she suddenly smiled. "There I go—letting imagination run away with me. Mom's always giving me the dickens for that. Forget it, Chris."

BUT HE couldn't, and as the evening progressed he had a feeling that she hadn't forgotten, either. More than once he caught her gaze upon him, noticed her glance linger on the point of his chin where a slight reddish swelling recorded the impact of Ben's fist. He heard little of John Worth's telephone boosting speech and the questions that buzzed back and forth between the leading rancher and the crowd. As soon afterwards as he dared, he made an excuse to leave, and was glad that Shirley did not demur.

It was a silent drive homeward, and when he helped her out of the rig at her own gate once more, Chris said reluctantly, "Guess I'll have to mosey right on now, too, Shirley. I promised Ben I'd get right back."

"Chris!" There was urgency in the softness of her voice. "I don't want to pry. But if there's something wrong and I can help right it in any way, I wish you'd let me."

She was close, her uplifted face tender and concerned in the waning moonlight. Chris couldn't help himself. Reaching out, he gathered her into his arms as he had never before dared to do.

"Just say you love me, Shirley," he begged, "enough to marry me—and forget everything else."

She snuggled close, laughing aloud in relief and happiness. "Is that all? Why didn't you ask me something hard, darling? Or don't you figure you're worth it?"

She was teasing, of course. Still the words thrust deep, reminding Chris that he was not his own free agent, reminding him of the buried past that had this night climbed out of its grave.

Now was the time to tell her. He'd been a fool to think he could escape that bitter trial.

"Shirley," he began huskily, and was cut off by the sounds of trotting hoofs and creaking wheels turning in the ranch gate.

"It's Mom and Dad," exclaimed Shirley. "Guess they didn't stay for the last dance, either. They'll be so happy to hear about us, Chris."

No chance now to take up again what he had barely started. With the appearance of Shirley's parents on the scene, Chris lost not only opportunity but the warm hope that had encouraged him to go on. Mrs. Worth's motherly kiss, John Worth's hearty handshake, choked him so with feeling that he could scarcely speak. It was exalting and marvelous to find himself so gladly received and approved as Shirley's choice of a husband. Exalting and marvelous—but awful, too. Chris was in a sweating torment by the time he was able to get away and set out for home.

A FEW MILES beyond the Running W, a branch in the road led to Ben's modest L Triangle. There a high hill with shelving, cliff-like sides loomed to the left, a density of brush skirting its base. And there Chris came upon a horseman blocking his way.

"Surprised?" queried Jed Snell, after Chris had pulled up.

"No. I figured you'd have something up your sleeve when you pretended not to know me back at the dance. What do you want?"

"Right to the point, eh? That suits me. And just so you don't get rambunctious when I spill my piece—" Turning in his saddle, Snell whistled lowly. Two more horsemen emerged from the hillside thicket down the road and advanced to his side. "Meet some friends of mine," the redhead chuckled. "Deke and Bert Codallon—my old pard, Chris Landon!"

Deke grunted. Bert said, "Howdy." From what Chris could make out, they appeared to be young and not bad-looking. But there had been an utter lack of expression in Bert's voice, and Chris guessed the same would be true of his eyes, if they could be seen clearly. Each Codallon wore two guns.

"What do you want?" repeated Chris.

This time Snell answered bluntly. "We've got a couple jobs lined up around here, but we need an extra man to help put them over. Thought you might want to throw in with us."

Chris tightened up. "No, thanks."

"Better not be hasty," advised Snell. "Suppose I was to get drunk in Tiptop tomorrow night and let out how well I know you—that you'd spent a few years behind bars? It might be quite a shock to some people—say that pretty little filly you just took home."

A rush of hot blood choked Chris. Still there was nothing he could do. He was unarmed, and they were three to one.

"Maybe it wouldn't make any difference to her," he said tightly. "Maybe she'd stick to me anyway!"

Snell laughed derisively. "Like I heard Eloise Grant stuck to Ben? And him only the brother of a jailbird, at that. Don't fool yourself, kid. I've asked questions around. That Worth girl's father is the biggest man in these parts. She's used to being looked up to. She ain't gonna throw

all that away and shame herself in front of her friends."

A guile he had never dreamed he possessed came to his aid. "I guess you're right at that, Snell," he said heavily, feigning dejected capitulation. "I can't disgrace Ben again, or face that girl, either, after—" He put a bitter recklessness into his voice. "If it's too late for me to turn back, why shouldn't I have the game along with the name? I'll throw in with you."

"That's the spirit." There was relief in Snell's voice. "Now get out of that rig and turn the team loose. We've already picked up a bronc and saddle for you. Deke, fetch it out of the brush."

As the outlaw named turned obediently away, Chris came alive. To be forced to accompany them at once would trap him hopelessly.

"You can't expect to drag me off like this at a minute's notice!" he protested.

"You're crazy if you think we're going to give you a chance to get away!" spoke up Bert. "How do we know you won't cross us and try to pull out of the country?"

"He won't dare, Bert." Deke spoke for the first time. "Because he knows damn well we'll run him down and leave him with a bellyful of lead. You get that, Landon?"

"I get it," admitted Chris.

"But he could still cross us some way after he's out of our sight," insisted Bert stubbornly. "Suppose he puts the sheriff to lookin' up reward posters—sics a posse on our trail?"

"How can he without letting out he used to wear stripes?" Snell entered the argument impatiently. "You're forgetting there ain't no one he can turn to for help except his brother, Ben. And what chance would just the two of 'em have against us three? Unless, maybe, you're afraid your draw's slowing up?"

Bert bridled to the sarcasm in the final question. "Like hell it is."

"Then what are you worrying about?" Snell snipped off the budding quarrel with finality. "Stop being so nervous and jumpy, Bert. You'll live longer and make less fool plays." He turned back to Chris.

"I'm not worrying about you, kid," he said. "I know you're no fool. Go on home and get lined out. But first—where'll we meet and when?"

Chris named a canyon some five miles away, giving directions for finding it, adding that he would join them there by sundown the next day.

"Too far off!" snapped Bert.

Snell seemed to think that, too. "Why can't you make it sooner?" he wanted to know. "Why not daylight?"

"I'll try to make it by then," promised Chris. He couldn't afford to hold out and risk having Bert's mistrust take hold of Snell's thinking. "But you'd better allow me a little longer, just in case something happens to hold me up. Wait until noon at least before going on the prod."

Chris sat still, watching them rein away, listening to the receding tread of their horses' hoofs. When it was gone, he drove on to the L Triangle. After hastily putting up the horses, he went directly to Ben's room.

His heart sank. It was unoccupied. Obviously Ben was out somewhere, fighting the black aftermath of their latest, bitterest clash. It had happened before.

IN AN AGONY of nervous suspense Chris paced the floor, waiting for his return, racking his brains for a way out of his predicament. As the night hours dragged by, he could see only one.

He packed up his few personal belongings. From a peg on the wall he took down the gun and cartridge belt that had been his father's. He cleaned and oiled the weapon, loaded, and buckled it about his hips. Then he went out to the barn, saddled a horse, and tied his pack behind the cantle.

It was as far as he could go without Ben. Near despair gripped him as he watched the sun come up. Half of the precious time he'd been able to gain had already run out. Out of sheer inability to remain idle, he cooked and ate a tasteless breakfast. Then at last the sound of a dragging step on the porch brought him to his feet, abruptly afire.

It was Ben. He entered slowly, shoulders

sagging, face so hollow-eyed and drawn with both emotional and physical fatigue that a rush of pity tightened Chris' throat.

"Ben, I . . ." he began.

"Why ain't you out on the job?" came the harsh interruption. "You think that fence is going to put itself up?"

An inward sinking feeling took hold of Chris. Fighting for calmness, he said, "Something more important came up, Ben. Last night in Tiptop I ran into Jed Snell."

Ben's facial muscles twitched. "Well?"

Chris related all that had taken place between him and Snell's party.

"So you stalled them off," remarked Ben, when he had finished. "Which must mean you figure you can outsmart 'em. How?"

A little encouraged, Chris went on. "They don't know I'm out of the pen on parole—that consequently Sheriff Hopkins already knows about my prison record. They figure I can't turn to him for help. But that's exactly what we've got to do. Don't you see?"

"We?" queried Ben.

Chris forced a smile. "If this deal had waited until that telephone line was completed, we could have contacted Hopkins in a few minutes," he pointed out. "But it didn't. That means someone's got to make a fifty-mile ride to the county seat, and it can't be me because I've got to join Snell by noon. They didn't mention any details about those local jobs they're planning. All I can do is string along with them. Have the sheriff get up a posse on some excuse or other and head into the hills this way. I'll steer both parties together somehow."

"And then?"

"Then we'll just have to let the chips fall," said Chris steadily. "They're outlaws. If they fight and get themselves killed, they've brought it on themselves."

"And if they're taken alive—if one of them gets a chance to talk?"

"Maybe it won't matter so much, then. Maybe being an ex-convict won't be considered such a disgrace, if it's proved I'm willing to fight to keep going straight now."

"At least maybe that's the way you can make Shirley Worth look at it, eh?"

CHRIS flinched at the biting sarcasm in the question.

"Yes. I'm thinking of Shirley," he admitted doggedly. "But I'm thinking of you just as much. I'm trying to do what's best all around, and there's no other way. If I pulled out with Snell and his gang, I'd violate my parole. The sheriff would take after me for that, and then everything would come out anyway. So, if you've got to become known as the brother of an ex-convict, wouldn't you rather it was one who was trying to do the right thing?"

Ben's gaze wavered. He half turned away. "Do you realize the chance you'll be taking?" he queried. "Suppose you're caught trying to signal Hopkins? Suppose they turn on you the minute they find there's a posse on their heels, knowing you're the only one could of set it there?"

"Those are some more chips we'll just have to let fall," answered Chris. "Don't you see it's a mess no matter which way I turn? But there's a fighting chance to pull out of it, if you'll give it to me. Will you ride to Juniper City and put it up to Hopkins—for your own sake, if not for mine?"

Ben continued to keep his head turned. A pulse beat visibly at his left temple. And then, just as it seemed he was on the point of giving in, a sound of horses' hoofs turned into the yard.

Chris glanced quickly out a window, and saw John Worth and Shirley. A sense of doom seized him. He turned wildly back to his brother, and then froze.

But that hint of softening had fled from Ben's face. It was abruptly like flint. The eyes he turned back to Chris were terrible to meet.

"Tell them!" he commanded. "Tell them everything! If it makes no difference—if they're willing to stand by you. . . ." His derisive smile made it plain that he did not believe they would.

Chris knew then that in Shirley Ben saw suddenly Eloise Grant, that with the pain of his loss driven home afresh, he had forgotten everything before a blind, passionate urge to strike back. Thunder seemed to crash in Chris' ears as he grasped for the first time the full depths of Ben's hate.

Dimly he was aware of the Worths entering the kitchen.

"I thought I'd get an early start and contact all the ranchers who weren't at the dance last night to hear this telephone business explained," began John Worth, a big blond man with Shirley's eyes. "You see, Ben, you're . . . ."

He stopped, abruptly aware of something amiss. Quickly he divided a questioning glance between the two brothers. Chris became aware that Shirley's expression, too, had sobered. Her eyes were wide and disturbed.

"Tell them!" Ben's command was harsh, inexorable. "Tell them—or I will!"

There was nothing else to do. Chris forced himself to speak. And as the words came out haltingly, everything save Shirley faded out of existence.

"Last night," he began painfully, "you promised to marry me. Will it make any difference if I tell you I—I'm a paroled convict? That I served five years of a ten-year sentence—for a stage holdup?"

In vain he fought off the emotion that stopped his words. There was so much more he might have told—that it had been ventured into only as a daring escapade on the part of a devil-may-care nineteen-year-old, toying with his first hard liquor; that he hadn't fired a shot himself or taken a bit of loot; that he'd been caught because he'd stayed behind to try to save the life of the stage driver, the shooting of whom had shocked him back to soberness.

But the whiteness of Shirley's face, the darkening of her eyes, stopped him. It did not occur to him to make allowance for shock, for the stark abruptness with which the truth had been flung at her. He waited for her to speak, and in her muteness he thought he read his answer.

"I understand, Shirley," he said gruffly. "It's all right."

Unseeingly he pushed past the other two men and out the door. He heard no sound of what transpired behind him. Mechanically he went to the barn, led the horse already saddled out the back door, mounted, and headed out to keep his rendezvous with the outlaw trio.

BLACK thoughts churned in his brain as the ground rose and fell beneath his mount's hoofs. He reached the designated canyon meeting place, pulled up and dismounted. Snell and his two confederates appeared from three different directions.

"Just hidin' out in the rocks, kid, until we made sure you were alone," explained the redhead. "It was Bert's idea—" His voice trailed off. He lifted his head, listening.

Chris saw the two Codallons stiffen to alertness. And then he, too, heard what had caught their attention—a rumble of galloping hoofs coming along his own back trail!

Bert's good-looking face twisted into a vicious mask. "A posse!" he snarled. "I told you we'd be double-crossed! He had it written all over him, the lousy son!"

Swift as a flash of light, Bert's gun was out and belching flame. Too surprised to have moved a muscle, Chris felt the bullet slam into his left side and spin him off the rock on which he was sitting. Through a ringing in his ears he heard Snell's angry protest, seemingly from a mountain top.

"You crazy fool, you're only guessin'! Hit cover until we see what's up. There can't be over three riders comin'. If we have to, we can mow 'em down easy. Scatter!"

Painfully Chris pulled himself up behind his rock, drawing the gun from his holster. Three riders on his trail. John Worth, Shirley, Ben. Why they should have followed him he couldn't try to guess. And they were pounding on into an ambush, ignoring the warning of Bert's shot.

Desperately he scanned the near landscape and spotted Bert, crouched, gun in hand, some twenty feet away. He fired and missed. Those five years in prison had not helped a marksmanship that had never been better than average. Bert spun on his heels, sixgun blazing.

A bullet struck Chris' rock and whined in ricochet. However, facing him, Bert presented a broadside target now, and when Chris squeezed trigger the second time he did not miss. The young outlaw fired once, convulsively, into the air. Clutching his

middle, he toppled forward on his head and settled into a twisted heap.

Simultaneously Snell and Deke reacted to this unexpected second source of danger. To Chris' blurring senses the narrow canyon became a battlefield. He was aware of bullets raining his way, of emptying his gun in return. Thundering hoofbeats beat upon his eardrums, along with the crashing reports of gunfire. He heard shouts, the terrified whinny of horses. He saw Ben and John Worth fighting plunging mounts, taking up the battle in his behalf. He saw Deke go down, and Snell throw up both hands in surrender. . . .

Then Shirley was kneeling over him, cradling his head in her arms, sobbing. "You ran off so quickly, Chris! You never gave me a chance to speak."

John Worth was examining his wound in frowning concern, exclaiming presently in relief. "Don't worry, honey!" he said to his daughter. "He'll be fit for a wedding in a couple of weeks." To Chris, he added, "She'd have caught you at the barn, only I held her back. I wanted her to be sure she knew what she was doing."

"Only she made it plain she didn't need to do that," said Ben, coming over. All the bitterness and hate was gone from his eyes. "I've been a fool, Chris, blaming you for Eloise throwing me over. The way Shirley has acted showed me Eloise had never loved me, really, or what happened wouldn't have made any difference to her. I want you to come back to the L Triangle as my partner. Will you?"

Unable to speak, Chris gripped the hand Ben offered him. Deke Codallon was beginning to stir and groan. Close by, the captive Jed Snell stood with baleful eyes.

They'd talk plenty. There'd be no hiding his prison brand any longer. But it wouldn't matter now. He'd be able to live it down because he was no longer alone. He had Shirley, and Ben, and he'd have friends. . . .

Chris turned to bury his face in the bright, fragrant hair of the girl still clinging to him, the girl whose love and loyalty had made his world whole again.

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**25th Anniversary Number**

**coming next**

***Gripping Stories Written for Us by Foremost Western Writers Who Appeared in Ranch Romances Its First Year of Publication and Who Still Rank at the Top***

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**By S. OMAR BARKER**

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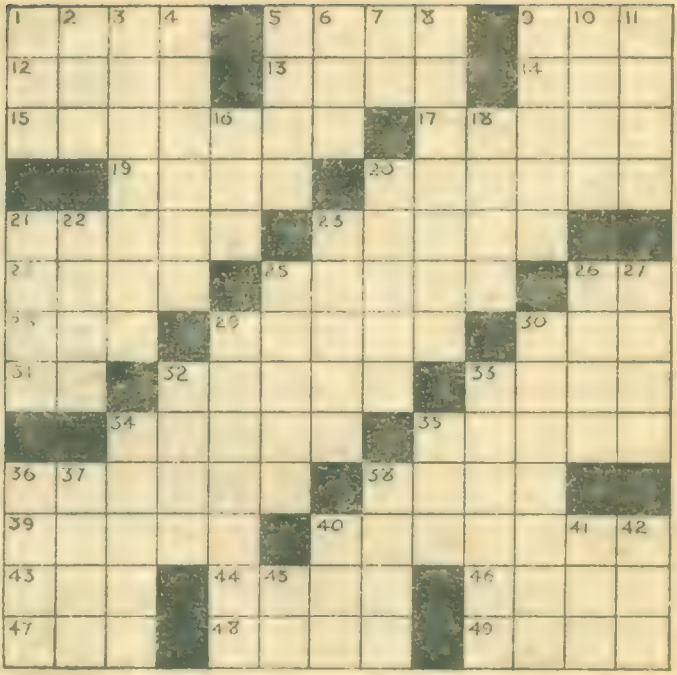
**By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH**

**Navajo Yei-bi-chi**

***A True Story of Ancient Indian Rites Few White Man Have Seen***

**By CLEE WOODS**

# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



*The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

ACROSS

1. Cattle
5. Ink spot
9. Buzzing insect
12. Subtle emanation
13. City in Nevada
14. Timber tree
15. Western treeless land
17. Not verse
19. Well-known fruit
20. Rodeo enclosures
21. Indian tent
23. Alloy of copper and zinc
24. Hurried
25. To concede
26. Mother
28. To make a mistake
29. Owner's mark on cattle
30. Is able to
31. Myself
32. To desire
33. Expense
34. Very polite
35. Cowboy's companion
36. To twist violently
38. Needy
39. Seraglio
40. Cowboy
43. Frozen water
44. Exclamation of sorrow
46. Paradise
47. Writing implement
48. To classify
49. To tear apart

DOWN

1. Type of hat
2. Belonging to us
3. Dressing gown
4. Navigated
5. Hat edge
6. Southern general
7. Not off
8. Head cowboy
9. Cowboy shoes
10. Comfort
11. Pieces out
16. To regret
18. Discoloration on iron
20. Raising machine
21. Those people
22. Ireland
23. Indian warrior
25. Solemn
26. Large quantity
27. Poker stake
29. Western humped cattle
30. To rust
32. Clever
33. Barrel maker
34. Fog-horn
35. In what manner
36. To beat into froth
37. Speed contest
38. To mail
40. Automobile
41. Knowledge
42. Finish
45. Behold!

*Solution to Puzzle in the First November Issue*

STILL so new it looked unreal against the sky, a great plume of green-tinged white smoke stood above the hill which hid La Paz—the banner of the great new Consolidated Copper mill. The road which ran from La Paz to Miraflor snaked down the bold face of the mountain and lost itself in the vast plain below, which extended southward until it vanished in the blue distance where Mexico began.

Fred Garis was looking in this direction. The men he had quietly followed out of La Paz were waiting beside a boulder-choked narrows on this road—Milland, the slender, cold little man who did various chores for Simon Calcott; Turner, a good stage man who had held cleaner jobs in his life but who now also worked under direct orders from Calcott; and lastly Royd, who had chopped up a miner in a bare-knuckled ring fight before a paying crowd the previous Sunday afternoon.

Garis had a keen interest in these men. He hadn't liked the way they had left town, and he didn't like their presence here. He was operations manager of the La Paz Stage and Freight Line, and whatever happened along this road to Miraflor, and the rails there, was his affair. He didn't need

# Copper Camp

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

*AN HOMBRE can hire gunmen to protect his interests,*

*but he's going to have to do his dying himself*

*Garis blinked at the lamplight and tried to lift his head*

the kind of help at which Milland and Turner and Royd were adept. He also worked for Simon Calcott, and he disliked this evidence that Calcott lacked faith in his ability to handle the competition with which the Mountain Stage Company of Miraflor was threatening the La Paz line.

Sitting motionless in his saddle, Garis watched a stage come up out of the flat and begin its climb into the hills. The waiting men in the boulders stirred expectantly. Garis narrowed his eyes. The stage labored up a long, steep grade, swung into a hairpin curve and came to an abrupt halt—apparently against a reata stretched across the road. With his lips tightening, Garis reined forward as Milland stepped out before the stage, gun in hand, covering the driver and the shotgun guard the Mountain Stage people had been sending along since they had been warned to take their coaches off the La Paz run. As Garis dismounted, a

rod from the tableau on the road, Milland's voice rang out sharply, with an order to the men on the box of the stage.

"Light down. Lay that scattergun aside easy, and hit the dust."

The two men on the box nodded and obeyed, with exaggerated care. Turner moved up to remove their shellbelts. Milland prodded the guard around toward the boot of the stage. Royd shuffled out of the brush, a grin on his battered face, bullet head down between his massive shoulders and his abnormally long arms swinging easily.

The driver was standing beside a front wheel. Royd headed directly toward him, his hoarse voice reaching out brutally as his hands would reach out in a moment.

"Brace yourself, bucko. You were ordered to keep your wheels out of these hills. Now you're going to find out what'll happen every time you ride a box toward La Paz."

The driver squared, took Royd's first hard rush with a parrying blow of his own which had honest strength in it, and was slammed back against the wheel behind him. Royd swore, wiped his scarred mouth and feinted the boy's guard down with an elemental ring trick.

What followed was explosive, cruel and efficient. The driver had no chance. Royd hit him half a dozen times with fists like mauls before stepping back. The driver tried to stay on his feet, but his knees buckled, and he slid down the side of the coach. Royd stepped toward him, and raised a heavily booted foot.

There was a certain amount of realism in Fred Garis—the knowledge that this was a rough and brutal country, and that the handling of competition required a measure of rough and brutal treatment. But this driver had been beaten in a pair of seconds to the verge of unconsciousness, and that seemed enough. He snapped a sharp, angry order.

"Hold it, Royd!"

THE RING MAN twisted around in startled surprise, reluctantly stepping away from the driver. Milland, with the guard at the boot, pivoted also, his gun leveled. Garis thought a flicker of disappointment crossed his face. He wondered if it was because he had not unholstered his own gun—because Milland had no opportunity for the misunderstanding which so often arose when two men faced each other suddenly with drawn weapons.

"This isn't any of your business, Garis," Milland said thinly. "Calcott gave us our orders."

"I'm giving you mine now," Garis said. "Get back to La Paz, and stay close when you get there. I'm going to have a talk with Calcott. When I'm done with him, maybe he'll have some new orders for you—your last ones. Get moving."

Turning to the door of the stage, he pulled it open. Six passengers were crowded inside.

"Light down, gentlemen," he told them. "This stage doesn't go any further. Collect your luggage and set it to one side of the road. There'll be a La Paz coach along in a few minutes to take you, at no charge, on up into the town."

The passengers obeyed uncertainly. The driver had pulled himself back up to his feet. Garis turned to him.

"Take this rig back into Miraflor," he ordered. "We've filed claim for the franchise on this run, and we're going to hold it. No Mountain Stage Company wheels are going to roll into these hills. You tell your people that, and you make them believe it."

The driver and the disarmed guard started to climb back up to the box. Royd was still standing a pair of yards away, glaring sullenly. Garis crossed to him.

"I know Calcott never pays off until a job is finished," he said, "and I broke this off in the middle. But I think I know about how much your fists are worth. Here's your pay—but there's an order goes with it. Climb your horse and ride—any direction but back to La Paz. Move!"

Garis turned back toward his horse. The Mountain driver had skillfully backed his team and now rolled it down toward the flat again. Milland had already vanished in the brush. Turner, who had once been driver for Grant Marsh in the days when coaches

had first rolled in these hills, approached Garis uncertainly.

"This was kind of a dirty job, Fred," he said. "I'm sort of glad you broke it up. Calcott never tells me what's really coming, like he does Milland, but I don't think this was all that was supposed to happen out here. I think you busted into it a little too soon. Maybe like a broke wire, it'll lash back and hit you square in the face. I'd watch out, boy."

Turner moved on past Fred and pulled into his own saddle, reining into the brush. Garis spat, as though the action would remove the unpleasant taste of this whole scene from his mouth, and turned his horse up the road toward La Paz.

THE TOWN was built along the bottom of a deep canyon threading a wild stretch of hills—a solid mile of twisting, rutted street between saloons, honky-tonks, assay offices, hastily erected shacks, a barn of a hotel, and the big corrugated iron building which housed the Consolidated Copper mill.

Consolidated was in production. Wall Street was pushing La Paz copper to the sky. It was a town of big money and quick fortunes. Ore and supplies shuttled back and forth along the road to Miraflor, nearest point on the railroad, sixty miles south, and the freight involved in that shuttling offered a surer road to fortune than a fat block of copper shares.

Midway along the street, in early twilight, Garis dismounted before a small, weathered shack. It was the oldest building in the town. Grant Marsh had erected it years ago as a way station when he was hauling supplies from Miraflor to Fort McCloud, on over the hills, running his wagons on a road he had himself built. It was now the headquarters of the La Paz Stage and Freight Line. Garis crossed the walk and entered the office.

Ellen Marsh was working on a big ledger at her desk behind the counter. She glanced up and nodded at Fred pinching the bridge of her nose between tired dark eyes. Garis frowned.

There was only one reason for his presence in La Paz—not his job with the line, and not a shot at the fortunes to be made in these arid hills. The girl before him held him here. He reached down a lamp from a shelf, tilted its chimney and touched its wick alight.

"You can afford oil," he said drily to Ellen. "Why work in the dark?"

"There's so much to do, with business growing so rapidly," Ellen answered. "I didn't know it was getting so late."

Garis scowled more deeply. A partnership between this girl and Simon Calcott was a curious thing. Ellen had provided her father's old freight outfit and the tenuous claim to a franchise to whichh it was entitled, as a nucleus; Simon Calcott had financed its expansion. Ellen kept books here and handled the paper work. Fred Garis bossed the rigs for wages. Calcott sat at a table near the back of the Copper Queen saloon from breakfast until midnight, playing solitaire. And while he sat, without apparent interest in the booming town, hirelings like Milland and the drunken Turner and Royd slowly brought to perfection his scheme for a transportation monopoly.

Fred went through a gate in the counter and picked up a sheet, covered with fine, copperplate writing, from the girl's desk. He saw that it was the current freight statement for the movement of Consolidated ore. He blinked at its totals.

The girl was watching him nervously. "Our ton-mile rate is up ten percent over last month," she said.

"That's not right!" Garis protested. "Total tonnage has increased. The Line's operations are running more smoothly every day. Our costs are going down. So should the rate."

"Simon doesn't think so, Fred," Ellen told him. "Consolidated's profits will be enormous this year. He thinks we're entitled to a share of them—and he's sure there'll be no cancellation of our hauling contract, no matter what we charge. Nothing can be hauled out of town without us."

"If those rates get hiked once more," Garis predicted grimly, "Consolidated will find a way to move their ore, all right. A

spur from the railroad, perhaps. Maybe it would cost seventy-five thousand dollars a mile to bring rails in. I've heard that figure. And it might be worth it to the mill. The boom in this town isn't going to break soon. La Paz is going to live a long time. And look at the passenger rates Calcott has set up! No stage line in the world has ever lived very long, charging that kind of fare."

"You aren't trying out the fit of the wrong saddle, are you, Fred?" Ellen asked gently.

GARIS grunted and dropped the Consolidated statement on her desk again.

"Guess I am," he said. "I was hired to keep stock fit and wheels rolling. That's the end of my responsibility. I'm just a little ringy tonight. Simon sent his boys out to break up a stage run the Mountain outfit tried to make up here this afternoon. It got a little raw, and I had to break it up. Simon makes a stage and freight outfit up here sound like something pretty. But it isn't pretty to the people who're getting their ears bent."

Ellen Marsh tilted her head upward at him. "Simon had already accumulated a small fortune when he came in here, Fred. He's a business man. I'm sure he understands what he is doing. I had too many lean years in La Paz before the boom to be very fussy about the fat ones, now they're rolling in. Security means something to me."

"It probably meant something to your dad, too," Garis growled. "What would Grant Marsh think of his line today? He was a fair man. His security was his belief in this country—the certainty it would grow—that Arizona could count its population in thousands, some day—in his part in the strong building his growth would require. Do you think there's any security which triple-charges its customers because they've got no other place to go?"

Ellen Marsh picked up the Consolidated statement, folded it, and slipped it into an envelope, sealing it carefully. "Simon is putting money into my bank account—a lot of it. That's important to me, Fred, terribly important. The company is growing as fast as you claim the country is. I'm going right ahead, keeping the books; why don't you keep on seeing that the wheels roll on schedule, and leave the worrying to Simon? You know that's his department after all."

Garis stared at the girl for a long moment without answering. He remembered how it had been when he had first arrived in La Paz. Almost singlehandedly, he had kept a two-stage line alive between Miraflor and the infant copper camp, waiting for the boom to gain momentum and doing most of the driving himself.

The growth had come with the growth of La Paz; financed by Simon Calcott, the line now had twelve coaches and thirty freight rigs. There were large stock corrals in both La Paz and Miraflor. In another year, as the output of the Consolidated mill continued to climb, the La Paz Stage and Freight Lines would have doubled in size.

Perhaps he had worked too hard, or had had too little time for the thing most important to him. Perhaps this, too, was Simon Calcott's work. The boom in La Paz had brought Fred Garis nothing. He had lost the close understanding which had for a while existed between himself and Ellen Marsh. He nodded at the envelope in the girl's hand.

"Go ahead and deliver that to Consolidated. I know better than to try any longer to stop you. But I'm going to talk to Simon about that new increase in rates. Consolidated has had about all it can stand—and so have I."

Ellen's hand reached out to catch Fred's

***Miss Ellen followed us and was all for butting in***

arm. "Wait until tomorrow—until some other time, Fred," she pleaded. "Simon doesn't like you. He's never liked you. He has only kept you on because I insisted. You say you caused his men some trouble down on the road this afternoon. He'll be in a bad mood because of that. I think he could be a very dangerous man!"

"I turn out honest work for honest pay, Ellen," Garis said steadily. "It's up to my boss to keep the outfit I work for in a clean game. If he doesn't, I've got a right to tell him about it. I don't like what Calcott has done to Grant Marsh's line, I don't like what he's doing to La Paz, and I don't like what I think he might do to you. I'll see you later."

On the walk outside, Garis glanced back into the office. Ellen Marsh was standing motionless behind the counter, her lips tight. She had paled. Garis knew that she, too, had at last realized that Calcott was going too far.

SIMON CALCOTT was the kind of man that a boom camp inevitably drew once in the course of its rise—seldom oftener than that—a lean, fastidious person, with the sheen of civilization so brightly burnished upon him that it seemed incredible he could tolerate life on the frontier. He was a man who nevertheless adjusted himself to the turbulence of boom-camp existence as though he had been born to it, and out of whose brilliant, facile mind had come schemes which had made and broken many bonanzas. He had towering ambitions, and no heart.

When Garis had eaten and made his nightly check of stock and gear at the company stables, he headed for the Copper Queen. An enterprising broker's office occupied the fore part of the building. Here, under lamplight, with no regard for the growing lateness of the hour, fevered men yet traded shares in a dozen companies—companies which were as yet no more than ornate stock certificates and standing acreage on the wild hill slopes as close to Consolidated's property as they could crowd.

Garis pushed through them without interest, knowing some of these men would make fortunes from their skyrocketing certificates. His faith, and his interest, were in reins and turning wheels—the things he knew.

Calcott was at his usual table toward the rear of the public room in the Copper Queen, an ascetic, ministerial man in appearance. He did not look up as Garis pulled up a chair and sat down, facing him. Milland was leaning against a pillar behind his boss, hat pulled low to shadow his narrow face. Dust thickly powdered him, and Garis wondered where Milland had been to pick it up since he had seen the man beside the stopped Mountain stage on the Miraflor road.

"You rather overstepped your authority this afternoon, Garis," Simon Calcott said quietly. "Royd has been very useful to me. I didn't want him discharged."

"We're a stage and freight line, Simon," Garis answered. "A man like Royd has no business on our payroll."

Calcott telescoped the cards before him into a little heap. "Our petition to take over old Grant Marsh's franchise on an exclusive basis for the La Paz-Miraflor run isn't doing too well at the capitol," he said. "The Mountain people have filed a protest—claim there's ample business here for two lines. The Mountain outfit is short of cash. The easiest way to quiet them is to break them. Fists are handiest for that kind of work. That's why I was using Royd. I've spent a lot of money to secure that franchise—my money. Your interference makes some of it wasted. I don't like it."

"I was hired as operations manager of the line, Calcott, in charge of all gear and road work. That Mountain stage this afternoon on the road was part of my job, but I wouldn't have known a thing about it if I hadn't seen Milland, Turner and Royd ride out of town together and followed them. Regardless of who I work for, I do a job the way I see it. If you don't like it, maybe you better get yourself a new rig boss."

"I've thought of that," Calcott said easily. "You broke up that squeeze we tried this afternoon, and as a result, Mountain shoved through another coach, a couple of hours after the first. It rolled into town a few

minutes ago. Let those people run a few round trips, and they'll have evidence to put before the legislature that they can maintain regular service. That's all they'll need to break our franchise. Something's got to be done about that coach."

Garis stared at the man. From the hill where the coach had been stopped this afternoon, he had been able to see most of the distance to Miraflor. If there had been other wheels turning on the flats, he would have seen the dust. There had been no second coach on the road.

"I want to see that stage, Simon," he said. "I want to look it over. Suppose you let me handle this. I'll see it's rolled empty back into Miraflor by morning, and I don't think it'll return. Just keep Milland and his playmates out of my department."

CALCOTT smiled faintly. "You're a good man, Garis," he said. "So damned predictable!"

Garis had a feeling there was a mockery in Calcott's smile. Milland was grinning faintly—a twist of thin lips in his shadowed face—and Fred thought there was mockery in this, too. He wished Calcott had a face a man could read. Ellen's partner never made a move unless it promised to benefit him. Garis suddenly had the troubling notion he might have done something exactly as Calcott had wished him to—that even to following Milland, Royd and Turner out of town this afternoon, he had been proceeding according to a pattern carefully laid out for him.

It was a ridiculous notion, but a persistent one. Garis pushed back through the crowd in the Copper Queen to the street again. A man left the bar near the door and followed him onto the walk. It was Turner, packing his usual nightly load of whiskey.

"Do me a favor, Garis," he said. "I want to deadhead down to Miraflor on the morning stage."

Fred looked at him sharply. "You're leaving La Paz?"

"For good," Turner agreed. "I reckon I've kind of gone to hell, but there's a limit to what any man's belly will hold."

Garis was swinging rapidly along the street. He doubled around the hotel, fairly certain where he would find the Mountain Stage Company coach which had sneaked into town. Turner kept pace with him.

"Look, Fred," he went on, "deep down you're a stage man, same as I used to be. Why don't you get out of these hills, too, before the lightning strikes?"

"You trying to tell me something, Turner?"

"Maybe. Milland didn't come back into town like you told him to, this afternoon. He stayed out in the brush on some private business of his own for a spell. I can't guess what he was doing, and I don't want to know. I'm afraid of him. And I'm afraid of Calcott. He's not building for you or Ellen or La Paz—just for himself."

Turner fell silent, as though he had exhausted his whiskey volubility. Garis had halted in the darkness behind the hotel. The Mountain Stage Company coach was sitting in a lot there. Garis did not have to strike a light for a closer look. Everything about stage work acquired sharp individuality, when a man spent his life with turning wheels. Fred recoknized this coach as the same one which had been stooped on the road this afternoon. It explained why he had seen no second dust cloud on the way up from Miraflor.

But it didn't explain why and how this one had rolled on into the town. He thought Calcott could answer this, and that now was the time to demand the answer. He turned away. As he did so, feet scraped in the darkness. A wide silhouette was suddenly between him and the aura of light from the street. Royd's hoarse voice reached exultantly out of the shadows.

"Now you're going to get a real fight for your cheap pay, Garis," he said.

One of the big fists came, then, exploding violently against the side of Garis' head. Shaken to his heels, he tried to clear his gun, but Royd stepped in fast, long arms whipping around him like constricting cables. Air was driven from Fred's lungs, and a razor-edge of pain slashed through his ribs on the right side. The crown of the man's thick-skulled bullet-head rammed into his face, stunning him.

Royd released him with professional ease, slid back a step, and swung a massive fist again. The blow seemed to bring down the hills above the town.

GARIS blinked at lamplight, burning through his eyelids. He tried to lift his head. A cool hand on his cheek restrained him. He realized he was in his own bed at the hotel, and this was Ellen Marsh bending over him.

"Easy, Fred," she murmured. "I think a couple of your ribs are cracked, and your face—"

Garis eluded her restraint and sat up. Turner was dozing in a chair tilted back against the wall across the room. He opened his eyes.

"Wondering why you ain't dead, boy?" he asked. "I grabbed your gun from the ground when you lost it and bent its barrel over Royd's skull. I didn't sober quick enough to keep you from getting messed up, but at least I discouraged him from kicking your head off when you were down."

"Thanks, Turner," Fred said. "I knew it would be a mistake if you left La Paz."

"The mistake was that the three of us here didn't get out sooner," Turner said sourly. "You better tell him, Miss Ellen—"

Garis turned his attention sharply to Ellen Marsh. Her face was pale with worry. "I delivered that statement to the Consolidated, Fred," she said wearily. "Mr. Abel, the general manager, blew up. He—he wasn't very pleasant. He refused payment, and said Consolidated would cancel our contract immediately. We could sue if we liked, but no court would uphold our exorbitant and constantly increasing charges."

Garis nodded. "I knew that was coming. But things aren't too bad, yet. If we can make Calcott be reasonable, it'll work out all right. Abel was just shooting off his mouth when he threatened cancellation. How can he move ore without us?"

"By the Mountain Stage outfit," Ellen said. "Mr. Abel told me he has a good offer from them."

"They haven't even got an ore wagon! And we've managed to keep them completely out of town."

"I'm afraid they've outsmarted us, Fred. And Simon, too. Mr. Abel told me that day before yesterday the legislature granted Mountain Stage Company an exclusive franchise for freight and passengers from Miraflor to La Paz."

Garis swung his feet to the floor and reached for his boots. A battered old clock on the stand beside his bed showed the hour was a little past midnight.

"This is where Calcott has got to go to work, then," he said.

"Wait," Ellen Marsh said heavily. "There's more. After talking to Mr. Abel, I went back to the office and did some thinking. I should have known that your advice was best—it has always been. I should have known that a man like Simon Calcott, who was willing to squeeze unreasonable profits out of others for his own company, would be willing to squeeze his partner for his own pocket. I think I see what he has done."

Garis grunted. "The money he claims he's been spending for a franchise at the capitol was being spent all right—but for Mountain Stages and not for our own line?"

"I'm afraid so," Ellen Marsh said.

GARIS stamped his feet to set his heels in his boots.

"I think that's what I've really been afraid of for weeks," he growled. "Abel's a hard-headed man. If he says Mountain Stages has a franchise, they must have it. They couldn't have got it without Calcott knowing, and if he wasn't in on the deal he'd have been fighting them tooth and nail—harder than he has. The answer is simple enough. Calcott is the Mountain Stage Company. And that explains some other things. The Mountain driver who was to have taken a bad beating this afternoon, for instance. A boy that stepped out of line—that didn't like Calcott's operations, and needed to be disciplined. Where does it leave you, Ellen? That's what I want to know. Who holds title to all the new equipment we've acquired during the past year?"

"Calcott put up money for half of it," Ellen said. "I borrowed against my share of the line for the other half."

*"I've come this far; I'll side you through to the end."*

"Where'd you get your loan?" Garis asked sharply.

"Calcott persuaded a man in Tucson to put up the money for my note."

"Which means Simon put it up himself, then," Garis growled. "So now our La Paz line is out of business, since it can't operate in violation of the franchise. Calcott will demand a receiver for the business, pick up all the stock and equipment at a fraction of cost, and transfer it to himself as Mountain Stages. When he does that, he'll have the monopoly he's wanted ever since he came in here."

"And there's nothing we can do," the girl said wearily.

"There's never a time something can't be done!" Garis snapped. "The problem is to do the right thing, so we can save the line your dad started, and all the hope and work you've put into it since. No man is perfect; Calcott can't be either. He can't have set up a perfect plan. There must be a loophole somewhere. You took him into the La Paz line as an equal partner?"

"Yes," Ellen admitted.

"And all the assets of the old line were put at the disposal of the firm—the stock, coaches, wagons, and corrals, here and at Miraflor? All the assets were included?"

The girl shook her head. Garis took a turn across the room. He thought of the line as it had been when he had gone to work for Ellen—two stages, and barely enough stock to provide teams for them. Many times he hadn't been sure the jaded animals could make it up to La Paz on that narrow, winding hill road.

He whirled, with an exclamation of excitement, stabbing a forefinger at Ellen. "The road! Your father built it himself, when he had those Army contracts for McCloud!"

Turner stirred and opened his eyes again. "Grant sure did," he said drily. "Needed a short cut, if he was to make any profit on his bid. All the way up from the flats, through La Paz and ten miles further on. I ought to know; I fired enough powder, building it."

"Did he charge tolls to anyone using it?" Garis asked tensely.

"No," Turner replied. "Grant wasn't that kind. But if somebody did want to travel over it, he made 'em ask his permission."

"That's enough!" Garis said. "If the road wasn't included in the contract you signed with Calcott, it's all yours now, Ellen. You've got a right to close it to

*Garis watched the stage come up out of the flat*

"Yes—and good will, too, of course, Fred; it all went into the contract between us."

"Was anything overlooked?" Fred questioned insistently. "Think, Ellen! Your father ran his line in these hills for twenty years. You were his only heir. Did he leave you anything which wasn't included in your contract with Calcott?"

public traffic whenever you wish, Ellen."

"We couldn't do that," the girl protested, "even if we were strong enough. It would cut La Paz off from the outside completely."

"Of course," Garis agreed. "I don't intend to close it. I just want to make Calcott believe we're ready to do so, if necessary. I'm going down to see him now. You sit

tight here until I get back. Wish me luck."

"You can't do that, Fred!" Ellen Marsh protested. "You're hurt, still shaky. Simon's never alone; he has Milland or another of his cutthroats with him all the time. And he won't be pleasant, now. You can't take the risk."

Garis smiled without humor. "Simon set Royd on me tonight. That means he wants me out of the way. He won't stop trying until he's sure I am. I'd be in just as much danger in this room as I would be out on the street. And I can't do anything for the line if I stand still. Time is important."

"Fred's right, Miss Ellen," Turner put in. Garis shifted his attention to the old driver.

"You come with me, Turner," he said. "There's a spare belt and gun in the lowest drawer of the dresser. Get them out. I want somebody beside me when I start on this walk."

Turner grinned. "Sure thing, boy. This is one stroll I wouldn't miss."

Garis nodded to the white-faced girl, and stepped out into the corridor.

MIDWAY up the dark and nearly deserted street, Garis asked a sharp question: "There's a back door into the Copper Queen?"

Turner nodded, indicating an alley. They swung into this, stepping warily through piles of accumulated trash. Turner found a door and forced it open. The room beyond was dark, cluttered with boxes and barrels. Turner led the way across this to a second door on the far side. He eased this open a trifle for a quick look, then pressed it closed again.

"Calcott's at his usual table," he growled. "Royd's tilted back in a chair there, too. No sign of Milland."

Garis nodded and peeled a bill from the roll in his pocket. "This is as far as you need to go, Turner. You were planning to ride down to Miraflor in the morning. Better do it; the morning coach will roll, no matter what happens here."

Turner swore in soft anger. "Maybe I've hit the bottle and the skids some, since the days when I drove for old Grant," he said. "But, damn it, Fred, when I buy a piece of something I want my share of it. I've come this far; I'm siding you through to the end."

In spite of his occasional whiskey bouts and the fact that he had seemed for a long time completely under Simon Calcott's dominance, Garis had always liked Turner. Now he knew why. He pulled the door before them open and stepped swiftly through it. He was at Calcott's table, sliding into a chair across from the man, with his back to the back wall of the saloon, in three long strides.

Calcott swung hastily toward him. Garis spoke softly. "Don't move, Simon, I've got a gun on you, under the table. Sit still. Keep your hands in sight, and hope that Royd behaves himself. Either we're going to have a talk, or you're going to die."

Royd shifted uneasily. The ring man's eyes were bloodshot and the crease left by the gun barrel Turner had swung was plainly visible on his bristly skull. His mood was obviously surly.

Simon Calcott shook off his first surprise and began once more to lay out his cards with cool composure.

"Just how big a damned fool can a man your size get to be, Garis?" he asked pleasantly. "Walk out of her now, grab a horse, point it any direction away from La Paz, and don't turn back. If you start quick enough, you might live and get away."

Garis was uneasy over Milland's absence. He would have preferred to face all of Calcott's threats at once. There were two or three men at the Copper Queen bar, toward the front, and one yawning bartender to serve them; the place was otherwise empty.

"I'll stay, Simon," he said. "At least for that talk. Talk about a double-dealing son who owns half of one good stage line and all of another. A man who wangled an exclusive franchise from a territorial legislature for the La Paz run, for an outfit that has only two stages for rolling stock; while his girl partner believed his word that he was getting this franchise for the line she shared with him."

CALCOTT leaned back in his chair. "Be reasonable, Garis," he said. "A fortune will be made out of freight and passage fares in this camp. You don't think I'm big enough fool to share that with anybody if I don't have to, do you? I needed the Marsh girl and the rag-tag remnants of a stage line her father left her, just like I needed you. But only for part of the way. I'm through with you, now—stay in La Paz, and Milland will take care of you. And I'm through with the girl. It's all a question of filing legal notices tomorrow and changing signs at the stations here and at Miraflor from the La Paz line to the Mountain Stage Company—then set my rates as steep as traffic will stand, and pocket all the profits. You act like I'd killed my mother. I've just done a piece of shrewd business, that's all."

"There's more to business than profits," Garis said quietly. "There's the country it has to live in and the people it has to serve. And there are various ways of handling transactions. In this country, we've got our own patterns. Your deal won't work."

"What kind of bluff is that?" Calcott asked amusedly. "What the hell do I care about the country or the people—unless they've got money in their pockets?"

"Nothing; that's the point," Garis told him. "Serve your papers in the morning, Simon. You'll get one served in return—a paper listing Ellen's terms for the use of the Miraflor-La Paz stage road. And she's going to have learned something from you. The rates she'll charge will break you overnight."

Calcott's eyes narrowed. "What the devil are you trying to say?" he snapped.

"It's Grant Marsh's road, Simon. He built it and maintained it, and as her father's heir Ellen now owns it. The road wasn't included in her contract with you. She still has sole title to it. You'll pay what she asks, or you won't turn a wheel over it."

"Nonsense!" Calcott said. 'We've been using that road in partnership operations for nearly a year. She can't claim exclusive ownership now."

"She can—and she can claim tolls for that year of partnership usage, too. It will make a fair case in court, and the territorial courts are slow. At least, you're going to be tied up for a long time, Simon; at worst, you'll lose your hide."

Calcott chuckled without humor. "I've made a mistake, Fred. I didn't realize what a troublesome man you could be."

Royd growled, shoving forward against the edge of the table, resting his massive fists on the felt.

"Give me another crack at him, boss," he pleaded. "Next time I hit him, he won't get up."

Garis glanced at the fighter.

"There's something in the sack for you and Milland, too, Royd," he said bleakly. "That Mountain Stage coach I was looking at when you jumped me tonight was the same one you boys stopped on the road this afternoon. I've been wondering what happened to the driver and the shotgun guard. Milland had dust thick on him when I was in here at supper time. I'm betting six horses kicked that dust into his face as he drove the Mountain coach into town himself. It doesn't leave much guessing about the driver and guard from Miraflor."

CALCOTT stirred jerkily. Garis looked at him again.

"They were your boys, Simon, and they got a little out of hand. This was your way of taking care of them so it would look like La Paz had jumped them in an effort to break down competition. Those men are dead out in the brush somewhere. Milland knows where they are, and maybe Royd does, too. The three of you were afraid I might find out, also. That's why Royd jumped me. He missed his chance. He won't have another. Calcott, get on your feet. You and Royd head quietly for the door. I'm coming right behind you. I'm going to find the sheriff's deputy here, and I'm going to swear out a murder complaint. That'll hold you until Ellen can get her suit in court, and I can find out about that guard and driver."

Calcott glanced at the street door of the Copper Queen. A puff of wind out on the walk had apparently made the batwings

there slant a little. He shrugged and rose to his feet. Nodding to Royd, he started up the room.

Turner, for all his avowal that he wanted a part of this, had not come on into the saloon with Garis. Fred was angry about this, now; he needed the man's help. These were two difficult prisoners, and they knew as well as he did that at this moment he had nothing real in the way of charges to maintain against them. Turner would have been helpful to make this stick.

Garis rose from the table to follow the two men. As he did so, a gun fired from behind him and to his left, and simultaneously a pair of slats on the street door of the Copper Queen splintered. There was smoke behind them, and a bullet came down the room to pass within inches of his head.

The street door swung open and Milland staggered in, his gun steady and low.

At the sound of the first shot, Calcott and Royd had leaped apart. Royd swung and circled back with surprising swiftness, big hands knotted. Calcott had already half-drawn a gun from a vest holster. Garis found himself with three targets and time for only one shot. He fired at Milland because the gunman was closest to the line of his sights. Milland flung back against the bar near the door, hung there for a moment, and sagged toward the floor.

Calcott's weapon was clear and up, its muzzle a scant pair of yards from the buckle of Garis' belt. Even as Fred braced himself for the impact of the man's bullet, the gun which had sounded behind him, precipitating this, fired again. Calcott winced, turned a little, and started walking toward a chair beside a neighboring table. He didn't make it. His knees buckled in mid-stride, and he fell heavily.

Royd, now desperate as an animal, crashed into Garis and bowled him over, a knee savagely grinding against his wrist and wedging the gun from his hand. Fred saw, beyond Royd's massive shoulder, a girl who stood in one shoe, a hand clamped in the short hair of Royd's bullet head while she hammered fearlessly and with surprising savagery at his skull with the heel of her other shoe.

Turner's figure appeared behind Ellen Marsh, holstering a still faintly smoking gun. Garis, then, understood the shots from behind him. Turner pried the girl from Royd. There was submission in the fighter now, as his little eyes shuttled from Calcott's broken body to that of Milland, farther up the room. He backed against the wall at a curt nod from Turner and remained there, motionless.

TURNER spoke with a quiet, satisfied wryness. "I'd have been at it quicker, but I was having a time in the storeroom with Miss Ellen. She followed us and was all for busting in on you and Calcott at the wrong time. Seemed to me like we ought to wait for Milland. When he showed up—"

"He tried to shoot you from there without warning, Fred!" the girl broke in. "Now it's over."

Garis shook his head. "This, maybe. But we've got chores. We've got to put the La Paz Stage and Freight Line back together, the way it ought to be."

Ellen Marsh smiled then.

"I know a girl who will handle the office, figuring rates and charges on a fair cost and profit basis. All she needs is a partner."

"And I know a man that would like to get his hands on an honest driving job again," Turner put in. "All he needs is a boss."

"I know a man, too," Garis said. "He owes the line a lot for not having chewed into this and straightened it out sooner. Let's get started. In about a week we'll have the kind of line Grant Marsh would have liked, running on his road. There'll be work and there'll be profit. The line will grow with the camp."

"Work, and honest profit—that's all you want, Fred?" Ellen Marsh asked.

"No," he said. "Neither would mean anything without you, girl—"

Ellen Marsh turned her face up to him, and Garis bent his head. Only a good thing could begin like this.

*Before Nettie and Ritt knew he was there, he had his gun up*

# Tough to Stop

**By Clee Woods**

IT MADE Gene Mason uneasy just to look at Nettie across the table from him. She was so small and cute, and always laughing. She had curly hair that was more red than brown; and her slender little face had a wilful recklessness in it, especially when she rebelled against something unfair or unjust.

She passed him the butter. When his fingers touched hers a quick, sharp something stung through his slim frame. They'd been like brother and sister these fourteen years, but today it had suddenly changed. Now he remembered that his coal-black hair hung pretty ragged onto his shirt collar. He needed a shave. His old wool shirt had fresh brush rips.

Bryson Ritt made him see all this. Ritt had been coming out to see Nettie at least every other day for ten days, and he was

***BRYSON would be man of the hour—if he lived that long***

---

no fitting man for Nettie. But how he could blow himself up to a girl.

With more than usual eagerness in his dark brown eyes, Gene asked, "You want to go with me to hunt horses, Net? Over on the Little Diamond, I mean. That bunch of KY Dash broncs broke out of the pasture last night."

Nettie said. "Why, Gene, I'm afraid I can't."

She glanced down at her plate, without looking at him or Mother Belle. Then all at once she was blushing. Gene flashed his dark eyes at Mother Belle, the little mite of

a grey woman at the head of the table. Mother Belle, too, had noticed the strange way Nettie was acting.

Any other time Nettie would have been happy to fling on her saddle and ride out with Gene. They'd been range pards, he and Nettie, ever since that ripping flash flood had caught their two families in the wagon. Gene, aged seven, had been riding his bay horse a hundred yards in advance of the wagon, and he'd crossed before the flood hit. Nettie, three years younger, still had been entangled in the wagon when it lodged on firm ground at the first sharp bend in the creek. One horse had been drowned; the other dragged the wagon and dead mate beyond the push of the water. But all four parents and two more small children had been lost in the flood, and with them went everything the two families owned, except the wagon and two surviving horses.

A cowboy found the two terrified children riding along the road, Nettie up behind Gene, and Bachelor Royal Mason had brought Gene to this very same little Link M horse ranch where they now ate their noonday meal. Widow Hall, running a little restaurant in town, had adopted Nettie. Then, after months of struggling separately to care for the children, Royal Mason and widow Hall had got married. Mason, with the children, began calling his wife Mother Belle. And Gene Mason began to be a horseman.

When Gene was only a slim spare kid of eleven, Royal Mason fell under a horse, and lived in agony for two months before he died. From there on Gene was the man in the saddle. Under Mother Belle's direction he bred and broke horses, sold them and bought them, built fences. But soon he needed no direction. His very life was horses; all his wisdom was horses; all his love was horses, except Mother Belle and Nettie.

NOW MOTHER BELLE said, "Gene, Nettie's been pretty hard at work on that braided bridle, and I think she wants to finish it—don't you, Nettie?"

"I sure do," Nettie accepted Mother Belle's covering up for her. "Next time, Gene—" She hesitated. A sharper pang hit Gene. Was she remembering that there might not be any next time?

"Okay," Gene said, getting up from the table.

But he didn't pinch her ear or poke her in the ribs, as he would have any day up to now. He gave Mother Belle a pat on the shoulder and began pulling on the buckskin gloves with the fine beadwork and lacy frills. Nettie had made the gloves for him.

"Gene, you better put on another shirt," urged Mother Belle.

"Soon as I get back, Mother," he said.

He pulled on his brown Stetson that was even more brush-whipped than his shirt. Under the hat his rugged, square-set face wasn't handsome, but it did have a lot of good strength.

He got out of the little adobe house as fast as he could, and hurried out to the corrals. He hated it about the KY Dash broncs. Only three days ago he'd brought over fifteen young horses for breaking from the KY Dash, at ten dollars a head.

Gene headed over through Little Juniper Pass. The tracks of the runaway broncs were fresh in the trail. The horses hadn't bothered often to stop and graze. They were on their way back to the KY Dash, a few miles beyond the county seat. The town lay down on the other side of the pass, and it was Gene's nearest trading point. But there was no wagon road, just this deep-worn trail.

Barely through the pass, Gene pulled up his snip-nosed bay. There came Bryson Ritt, on his way to see Nettie again, no doubt. The two men rode toward each other at casual gait, but wariness had hit each of them.

Gene halted and let Ritt ride up. Ritt reined in at close range. It was as though a strange, sudden hatred lashed from one man to the other as their eyes met—Gene's eyes deep-set, dark and burning, Ritt's a bright hazel.

"Hello, Gene," Ritt greeted him, a superior touch of a smile on his lips. "Is Nettie home?"

IN SHARP contrast to Gene's uncut hair and saddle-saddened clothes, Ritt carried every inch of his six-foot-two with handsome dash. He had a well chiseled face; he wore a new forty-dollar Stetson, cream-colored, a flashy red shirt, moleskin breeches and polished boots. To Nettie he'd talked grand illusions for his future, and the way he handed her compliments would have turned any girl's head.

Gene answered, "You better ride back the other way, Ritt. You're not a fit man to keep Nettie company."

Ritt laughed. He didn't try to hide his contempt for this young bronc-peeler whose tongue was as range-rusty as his clothes.

"So you finally come out with it, huh?" Ritt taunted. "You're jealous of me, kid. Is that it?"

"Never mind that," Gene said, and he stepped off his sweaty horse.

The smile left Ritt's clean-shaven face. He also lighted, letting his horse's reins fall to the ground. They stood within arm's reach of each other. Both men wore holstered guns. Ritt's was a pearl-handled, gold-inlaid Smith and Wesson; Gene's a plain old cedar-handled Colt. There hadn't been any smile on Gene's face.

"I'd hate to have to kill you, Mason," Ritt said, and he put deep menace in his lowered words. "But that's just what I'll do if you jump me."

"I'll jump you before I'll let you go on down there," Gene vowed, jerking head back the way he had come. "Nettie is the same as a sister of mine, and I'm the only man left in the world to protect her from a prowlin' coyote like you."

Gene didn't know anything but the straight honest talk of the range. Actually, he knew little about Ritt. But he'd been present at a roundup fire one night three week ago, and heard Ritt talk. The talk had been of women, horse-racing, gambling, and more women. But that was before Ritt even met Nettie.

"You protect her!" Ritt scorned Gene's last words. "You want her money more than the girl herself."

Gene went colder. So Ritt knew! Nettie had fallen in love with him so completely that she'd told. Up to now, nobody but Mother Belle had ever known where Gene and Nettie kept their treasure hoard. They'd been pooling their wealth in one cache ever since Mother Belle had married Royal Mason and had come to live on the Link M.

When Mother Belle adopted Nettie, cowboys all up and down the valley began a strange custom. They knew that Mother Belle barely was making ends meet after she took on the added expense of the child, so at the next roundup they made up a brand for her, the NET, and put it on three maverick yearlings. From then on cowboys put the NET iron on many a maverick. When the NET she-stuff became cows and brought calves, they branded the calves for her.

Mother Belle had Nettie's brand registered. And the NET cattle stayed right on whatever ranch they happened to be found on. At shipping time each cowman sold Nettie's stuff with his own, and sent the check to Mother Belle. A few times Mother Belle had to spend some of the money, but most of the time she put it away for Nettie.

When he was ten years old Gene had started panning gold over on Big Shirt Creek, at an off season when he had no horses to break. Some days he'd make no more than fifty cents—barely a showing of dust and flakes. Other times he'd hit it lucky and pan up to six and eight dollars. For eleven years he'd done this, and never sold one flake of the gold.

All this time Gene and Nettie had been putting their fortune, his virgin gold and her savings converted into gold coin, into a hole in the side of a cliff. Right now the cache had something over thirty-one hundred dollars in it. Nettie herself would be prize enough for any devil like Ritt to want, but if he could talk her into taking her gold from that cache, how much more would he want to marry her.

RITT'S taunt stung Gene. He flared back, "You're the one who'll thieve her out of her money, you dirty—"

Ritt laughed, and this time he put into his laugh his feeling of superiority over Gene. He said, "Then why should I get

myself into trouble by killing a young fool up here in a lonesome pass like this, even if the law cleared me? When I'm through working you over, kid, you'll not feel like interfering with my love affairs. Or do you have the guts to shuck off that gun?"

Sure of Gene's response, Ritt unbuckled his gunbelt and let the weapon fall to the ground behind him. Gene promptly shucked his own gunbelt.

He felt sharp fear thrust through him as the gunbelt left his hand. That old cedar made any two men equal, regardless of size. But barehanded, he didn't feel so good. Ritt would have pushed two hundred pounds close, without ripple of fat around his waist. Gene was so spare and lean that, despite a pair of fine shoulders under that torn brown shirt, he weighed only one hundred and sixty-five pounds.

"You've got this coming, kid," Ritt told Gene. "You're tried to come between me and Nettie. You've browbeat her, and lied, and—"

He never finished. Gene flew at him before he could get out any more of the insult. But that was just what Ritt wanted.

Gene felt a terrific fist meet his jaw, and reeled backwards under it. He heard Ritt's taunting, "That's only a start, kid." Then Ritt was upon him, his heavy fists pounding down Gene's guard, driving through.

Gene retreated under the tornado of fists; then he tripped over a root and fell backwards. Ritt rushed in on him, kicking at him savagely. Gene scrambled away so fast he got no full impact of the cruel boots.

Then he was back on his feet and stepping up to Ritt, boxing now, holding Ritt off with clever counter-punches. Ritt was spending his force in still more brutal charges.

Gene cut a left to Ritt's jaw, then crossed a right into the big man's nose. Ritt charged in with big arms clutching for Gene, which gave Gene the chance he wanted. He suddenly stopped retreating, ducked and then came up into Ritt with all the dynamite in his body behind a jabbing right.

Ritt fell then, his eyes going glassy. He crashed out full length in the trail, while both horses snorted off at the smell of blood.

Gene ran and caught his own horse. Then he came back and picked up his Colt, and slowly buckled it on. What would he do next? If he left Ritt here, the guy probably would come to, get on his horse and come on down to the ranch for more trouble. He'd be there anyway, sooner or later. But Gene wanted it to be later. He needed to have a talk with Nettie.

Gene caught Ritt's black horse, led it back, and tied it short to a tree. Then he hunched down, slowly gathered the unconscious form onto his shoulders and heaved Ritt across his saddle. There he strapped him, running a rope from Ritt's rawhided hands to his feet on the other side. The horse belonged to Wickenshield's livery stable in Kirkville. Gene decided that he'd take both horse and the unconscious Ritt back to town.

Two miles down the trail toward Kirkville Gene met Danny Wade, B80 rep. Slouchy old Wade looked at Ritt's bruised face. Then he grinned at Gene.

"Bounty on that varmint, that you have to take it in?" he asked Gene.

Gene said without smiling, "Pity is, the law lets his kind run loose. Seen anything of a bunch of KY Dash horses—young stuff?"

"Yep. On Paint Rock Mesa. Mebbe eight or ten of 'em."

"They're headin' for home. I better shove along, Danny."

"Sure he ain't dead?" Danny asked abruptly, nodding at Ritt.

"No, just out cold."

GENE got more troubled as he rode on. After another mile he dismounted and went back to look at Ritt. No, not dead. Was he playing possum? Gene turned Ritt's horse loose and lashed it into a trot toward town. Ritt's long hair hung down from his head and waved like a silky black tassel.

Gene turned across to Paint Rock Mesa

and cut the fresh sign of the broncs. He didn't overtake the broncs until they were back on their home range, at sundown. He thought he'd better stay all night at the KY Dash, and get help to regather the young broncs early next morning.

At supper that night Gene didn't have much to say. He was thinking of Nettie, and of what Bryson Ritt might do next. After he'd gone to bed he wasn't able to sleep. Ritt was a dangerous man. Slowly at first that thought deepened in Gene's conviction; then it settled more heavily upon him. Ritt wouldn't be whipped, and not be sorely tempted to fight back.

But in the same breath he knew the suggestion was useless. A man could hide stolen money within a few minutes after it had been taken. If he went to jail it would give Ritt all the chance in the world to snatch Nettie away. Nettie might believe Ritt's line, if Ritt made her believe that Gene had turned crook.

Sheriff Porter must have read some of these desperate thoughts in Gene's head. He'd known Gene ever since Royal Mason took him as his own son, and he thought a lot of him.

Porter said, "Gene, you better face it. If Ritt is framin' you we'll find it out."

## IT HAPPENED ON THE PECOS

**ANOTHER salty Judge Bean story has recently come to our attention. Roy Bean, known as the law west of the Pecos, was called from his home town of Lantry, Texas, to preside over the inquest of 10 men who had died during the construction of the old Southern Pacific RR bridge over the Pecos in 1891. Judge Bean looked at the men who had fallen into the Pecos canyon, heard the story of the accident, and pronounced a verdict of accidental death.**

**"But three of these men aren't dead," someone excitedly told the judge.**

**"That's all right," said Judge Bean. "They're going to die as sure as shootin', and I ain't a-goin' to ride up here just to hold another inquest."**

By noon the next day they had the broncs gathered again and in the corral. After lunch Gene decided to throw the broncs onto the trail.

But before he had the corral gate open a rider came up the canyon. It was small, grey-bearded Sheriff Sam Porter.

Gene was the man the sheriff wanted, all right. Five KY Dash cowboys gathered around. The sheriff read the warrant to Gene. He wasn't being arrested for whipping Ritt, but for taking one thousand and eight hundred dollars out of Ritt's pocket while he lay unconscious!

"You mean," Gene said, "that he claims I robbed him?"

"That's what he swore to," the sheriff said. "I'll have to take you in, Gene."

"No. Search me right now, sheriff!" Gene exclaimed.

ALTHOUGH Nettie was at home, fourteen miles from here, the image of her face kept appearing through the iron bars. Sometimes the image became sharper in Nettie's smiling wilfulness.

Gene called up the corridor, "Hey, Mr. Porter, would you mind comin' back here? Just one more talk, that's all."

The sheriff stepped to the door of his office. "Gene, it's no use," he said. "You'll get your hearing before the J.P. tomorrow."

Gene called back, "All right, Mr. Porter. But—is that what Royal Mason told you that time he went on your note—when not another man in the county would endorse for you? You were down with gallstone trouble then—might've died, even."

Porter started down the hall. He said,

"Maybe I did forget, Gene. You're Mason's boy."

Gene got straight down to business. "Ritt framed me with this charge, Mr. Porter. He wants me out of the way so he can make off with Nettie—and all the money she's saved from her NET cattle."

"He couldn't do that!" the old sheriff exclaimed. "Why, Gene, I was on that roundup myself, when they branded the first three mavericks for Nettie. That was about fifteen years ago."

"Then let me out of here, soon as dark comes," Gene implored. "I'll be gone only through one day."

"You might go out there and get killed," Porter demurred.

Gene argued, but it had no effect, and finally, Sheriff Porter went out to his supper, and Gene was left alone in the jail.

It was deep dusk when Porter came back, carrying Gene's supper on a tray. Instead of passing the food a dish at a time through the small aperture, Porter opened the cell door and handed tray and all to Gene.

"'Scuse me for bein' late, Gene," the sheriff said. "I had to feed your horse first. He's in my barn straight out back of here."

There was something odd in the old man's voice. It was enough to shoot quick temptation through Gene. Here was a chance to break jail. It'd mean a mighty risk, even though Sheriff Porter was a very careless man with a prisoner. But Gene had the bare suspicion that Porter might really be inviting him to take his freedom.

He turned his back squarely on Gene when he started out of the cell. There hung his six-shooter on his hip. Gene made a sudden quick grab for the Colt, and got it. Porter whirled, then flung his hands up without being told.

"I'm sorry, sheriff," Gene said, "but I'm on my way out. I'll come back—when I've got the goods on Ritt."

"Gene, you realize what you're doin'?" Porter said.

"Sure. Sidle over there into the corner of this cell. Come on, move. That's it."

Gene slammed the door shut and locked Porter in the cell.

IT WAS nearly ten o'clock when Gene got home. The moon was up and the place was very quiet, but a light burned in the front room. Mother Belle was still up.

When Gene stepped into the room she was there at the door meeting him. She'd been crying. She broke out afresh now.

She sobbed. "She's gone, Gene!"

"With—him?" Gene asked slowly.

"Yes. While I was washing the supper dishes she slipped out the front door. She left this note."

Dear Mother Belle and Gene:
Bryson and I will be married when we reach Valley Falls tonight. He brought the license from Kirkville. Preacher Harris is waiting. Please forgive me. I'll write to you both in a few days.

With all my love,
Nettie

P. S.
I'm taking my money, Gene, and leaving all your gold.

Gene's eyes left the paper and fell back on Mother Belle, whose tears were streaking her worn cheeks.

"But she didn't leave your gold, Gene. I went up to see. Everything in the cache is gone," she said.

Only Mother Belle had shared the secret of the cache with Nettie and Gene. It was a deep hole in the cliff over in the next canyon. Long ago Gene had tugged a long sliver of rock from its place in the cliff wall. He'd broken off the inside half of the rock. When the outside piece was replaced it left a gallon-sized hole in back of it, and no eye even at close range would have suspected that this particular rock was any different from a thousand others in the broken contour of the ragged cliff wall.

Safer than a vault, they'd always told each other. After the treasures had grown to greater proportions they never went to the cache in the daylight. They always waited for moonlight and went together to make a deposit of steer money or gold pannings.

Gene said, as if talking to himself, "Mother Belle, Nettie couldn't have run off with my gold. That's Ritt's work. He went with her or watched her go, and then

went back and got my gold. How long've they been gone?"

"Can't be over two hours, maybe not that. We didn't have supper until late. I noticed she was mighty goosey."

"Maybe I still can stop it," Gene said, and ran out to the corral.

He roped a fresh mount, a rangy big black horse, flung his saddle onto its back, and threw the black into an easy gallop.

Four miles on he saw fresh horses snorting off from him, tails in the air. He slowed down and drew near them, loop built down out of sight. He worked the horses into a pocket of fence and low cliff, then made a run. Got one the first throw.

Pushing on down the canyon, he took short cuts through bottoms that bristled with cholla cactus and a thousand yucca heads, and through a little Mexican village already asleep behind its heavy adobe walls, except in one house that sent out the sweet odor of cooking tortillas and boiling coffee.

At the far side of the village some boys sat around a bonfire, the way the young ones of Spanish blood always do in the early fall. Gene knew them all. He called to them in their language. "Saw you two riders on horses, a man and a girl?"

*"Si, amigo,"* one answered hesitantly.

"How long ago?"

"It makes only a short time ago, Gene. Maybe twenty minutes."

Only twenty minutes! Then where had they lost so much time? Gene knew he hadn't gained that much on them. The delay must have been caused by Ritt's trip to the side of the cliff for that gold!

IN VALLEY FALLS Gene fought his dinked horse straight for preacher Harris's house.

"No, they never came here," the little bearded preacher answered Gene's anxious inquiry.

Then Gene heard the whistle of a train. The branchline train rolled down toward the station, one combination passenger coach and baggage car behind a dozen cattle and box cars.

Gene spurred his horse hard for the station. The train already had halted. Of course Ritt would want to get out of the country with Nettie and her gold. And with the leather pouch that held Gene's panned gold.

Gene's horse shied and reared and wouldn't pass the locomotive. Gene had to drop off him and run for the steps of the coach. Already the bell was clanging. Then the coughing engine began to churn its ancient drive wheels.

Racing alongside the coach, Gene looked into the lighted interior, and saw Nettie and Ritt!

Gene stepped onto the moving coach, swung up. On the platform outside he paused a moment. Nettie was too wilful to listen to any argument he might put up. That kid had to be shown—always.

Gene didn't reason the thing beyond that. He pushed into the coach and started up the aisle. The coach was full. Two cowboys were standing in the aisle, but Gene didn't know them or anybody else in the seats. Most of the passengers had come from mining towns up the river.

Before Ritt and Nettie knew he was there Gene hauled out his Colt and had it in Ritt's face.

"I want my gold," he snapped.

Ritt was a fast thinker. He seized this chance, and shouted, "Folks, this is a train holdup! Don't let one man rob every last one of us!"

Nettie leaped to her feet crying, "Oh, Gene, don't!"

Gene was so dismayed that he didn't realize what a tight spot he was in—then it was too late. One of the cowboys, seeing Gene's gun on Ritt only, jerked his gun and sent a bullet close by Gene's head.

Panic hit the car. Several more men were snatching guns from somewhere, and Ritt also had leaped to his feet. The brakeman was pulling the bellcord. Gene whirled for the door and ducked down low, all in the same action.

The cowboy fired a second time. In the same instant the coach lurched from the sudden application of emergency brakes. Ritt was thrown toward the aisle, and one bullet of the three fired at that minute hit

him flush in the side. That saved Gene from getting the bullet.

Gene reached the door, leaped to the cindered walk. Then all at once he made up his mind he wouldn't run away from it. He'd stay and tell them just how it was. They'd believe him. They'd find the gold on Ritt.

When the passengers came out Gene stood with hands lifted, his gun on the walk.

"Folks," he cried, "I aimed only to stop Bryson Ritt. He was running off with my gold—what I've panned for eleven years. And with Nettie and her money."

"He didn't have your gold," Nettie cried out the window. "I took only my money from the cache."

From a passenger came the shout, "You can't lie outa this thing! You tried to rob us, then lost your nerve. Folks, let's string him up to the nearest telegraph pole!"

The speaker was huge, bald-headed Rufus Rodden, a square-faced man with lots of force. The miners and the two cowboys hardly needed Rodden's loud urging.

"Git a rope, fellers!" cried one of the cowboys.

They surged around Gene, and rough hands clamped onto him. Gene had never had such terror drive through him. They were going to put a rope around his neck and strangle him to death.

"Listen, men," he pleaded, "give me a chance. I can show you—"

"We've seen enough!" Rodden shouted.

A TERRIFYING urge hit Gene to fight loose, but it was utterly hopeless. Too many hefty, angry men had hold of him. They began dragging him toward the railroad water tank on the outer edge of town. Its heavy timbered framework would be right handy to hang a man from.

Gene looked for Nettie. He didn't see her because she'd stayed in the coach with Ritt. She and two women were helping the wounded Ritt from the coach.

"Oh, Bryson, darling!" she moaned.

"Get—my suitcase," Ritt gasped.

A frightened youth snatched his suitcase from the seat and followed with it. When Nettie got Ritt to the platform outside, she saw only dimly a swirling body of men moving toward the water tank.

An old woman beside Nettie said, "Poor boy! They're going to hang him!"

"Hang him—Gene?" and sharp pain caught in Nettie's throat as she asked it.

The next instant she was tearing after that dark clump of moving men.

"Wait," she cried. "That's Gene Mason. He's just a cowboy. Wait, let me tell you how it is!"

They kept on going for the water tank, but Nettie shouted more tragically. The mob paused.

"That's Gene Mason," she told them again, as if his very name were enough. "Gene is—Gene and I were raised together. He's just mistaken about Mr. Ritt and the gold."

Gene had a flash of hope. At the same time something good was striking through him. Nettie had come to him, to save him, even while Ritt was shot and in bad condition.

"Search Ritt," Gene urged. "You'll find my gold on him."

Rufus Rodden was a judge of men, when he stopped to think. "Well, men," he said, "maybe we're too hasty. It's only fair to see if he's tellin' the truth."

They went back to where Ritt lay. Unconvinced men still held Gene, but they took him back. Rodden himself searched Ritt.

"No gold on him," Rodden announced, a new threat to Gene in his voice.

"Look in his suitcase," Gene urged.

And there the gold was found. That leather pouch with over five pounds of gold dust and nuggets and flake gold.

"That Gene Mason's gold?" the big baldheaded Rodden demanded of Nettie.

"Yes," the girl whispered, horror in her eyes. "That's Gene's all right. Bryson Ritt—he stole it!"

Gene told them of Ritt's false charge that had landed him in jail. The mob wanted to turn and lynch Ritt, but Rodden held them in momentary check. Pleading for mercy, Ritt confessed to the fake

charges against Gene. For by now Ritt knew he was going to die.

GENE didn't try to talk to Nettie that night. The next morning he bought new cowboy duds—good dark bull breeches, Justin boots, brown Stetson, three grey wool shirts. Then he went to a barber shop, had haircut and shave and bath.

He saw Nettie's eyes whip over him in quick appraisal when they met. They rode back together. There was little talk between them, nor for the next three days did they talk much. Gene went after the KY Dash broncs.

The fourth evening, at late dusk, Gene was turning loose a young bronc. He swung the saddle onto the pole of the corral fence. The moon was just barely peeping over the mountain.

"Gene?"

Nettie's low word was soft, questioning. It said she was afraid.

He turned around. There she was, so close to him. "Gene," she asked, "I've been thinking. Don't you imagine we better take all our gold in and bank it—together?"

He reached out for her, without thinking. Something bigger than thought or words had hit him. He took her into his arms, and that kiss could never been called a brotherly one.

# KNOW YOUR WEST

**1. Buzzards and ravens are both common carrion eaters of the West. Are they the same bird?**

**2. Old-time Pony Express riders made good use of mochilas (mo-CHEE-lahs). What were they?**

**3. Give two cowboy slang names for a cowboy of the Texas brush country.**

**4. Identify this mountainous state by the following names of its rivers: Arkansas, Republican, Cimarrón, Purgatoire, Cherry, Río Grande, Gunnison, Arikaree, San Juan, Dolores, Snake, South Platte, Cache la Poudre.**

**5. Identify this Western state by these names of its lakes: Priest, Pend Oreille, Coeur d'Alene, Walcott, American Falls, Grays, Spirit, Mad, Magic. (Some of these are man-made reservoirs.)**

**6. Is the stifle joint in a horse's front or hind leg?**

**7. What would you do with a putto: eat it, smoke it, chase it out of camp, skin it, drink it, stake a horse to it, or sleep on it?**

**8. Although often so called, are all cowboy blue denim jeans actually levis?**

**9. "Tamp-R-Pruf Ear Seals" are advertised in Western livestock publications. What are they?**

**10. What does a cowboy mean by a stool-and-bucket cow?**

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

**You will find the answers to these questions on page 94. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

*"Why did you come?" Tay asked at last*

# TRADING POST

*By Alice Wright Wallace*

WITH THE marked indifference of a man long accustomed to his own company, Tay Brown watched the big Concord stage-coach wheel around the bend. In clouds of choking dust the six horses were braked to a stop by their driver, Bill Chasteen.

Seeing that Monty Brand wasn't aboard, Tay frowned his disappointment. If Monty didn't get back soon to take over his trading post, Tay would miss out on the chance to go south with the other rannies where the pickings were good, running your brands on mavericks.

"Give us a hand, Tay!" Chasteen bellowed from his perch, punctuating his words with a stream of tobacco juice expertly aimed to the right of the rear broncs' nervous hoofs.

His tall, lean body moving effortlessly, Tay stepped down from the porch of Monty's Trading Post. He raised dark, inquiring eyebrows.

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*THEY SWORE never to love again*

*—but then they met each other*

"Got a passenger for you, but not the one you've been expectin'," Chasteen called out, as he suggestively winked a blood-shot eye. "By damn, how's to take my place on the box, and let me stay and keep store?"

Before he could answer, Tay's startled eyes were aware of the slender young woman in fawn-colored foulard who had alighted from the coach. Wind molded the silky cloth against shapely limbs, and tugged at rich green ostrich plumes on a small bonnet. She moved toward Tay, holding a small carpet bag with one small gloved hand, and her hat with the other.

Tay took a startled step forward. "Sure you have the right stop, ma'am?" he asked, trying to place in memory just where he'd seen the pretty features before.

"I left my other baggage in Gold City," she said. "I'm Abbey Dawson, Rolph Dawson's widow." Her brown eyes searched Tay's startled grey ones.

"Of course!" Tay had seen her likeness in a photo . . . one of the two from a pocket in the late Rolph Dawson's coat.

"I'm staying only until the next return stage," she added.

Tay's emotions tightened up like a rawhide riata on a running longhorn. "But that would be four days!" he said.

"I know . . . but I had to come! You can put me up for that short time? I'll be no trouble, and I'll pay, of course." Her voice had grown so low that Bill Chasteen strained to hear above the jangling harness of the restless team.

TAY SHOULD have known that Dawson's widow would expect to lariat anything she needed with her purse strings! His lips opened to explode a dozen reasons why she had no business here at this lonely spot, with only him for company—not counting a half-hundred Arapahoes camped over yonder hill, who were shunned by their tribesmen and whites alike. But her doleful expression changed his mind.

"Well, come on," he shrugged, taking the bag from Abbey's hand. His thoughts raced ahead of him. She'd have to sleep in the lean-to, in the very bunk on which her husband had cashed in his chips just two months ago.

Tay slammed the bag hard onto a crude bench in the darkened storeroom. "I don't exactly have first class hotel accommodations," he remarked dryly.

"I didn't expect them," she answered pleasantly, "but I would like a drink of water."

"Help yourself." Tay pointed to a pail and dipper which stood on a box near her. There was the soft rustling of silk as she moved. She made a wry face. but drank thirstily of the brackish stuff, touching her lips with a wisp of a 'kerchief. She sank into the only comfortable chair, an ancient rocker with the calfhide seat sagging from long supporting Monty Brand's great weight.

"Why did you come?" Tay asked at last. "I wrote you all there was to tell about your husband."

Her eyes lingered with obvious interest on the pine-board shelves containing Tay's law books, then wandered to the holstered gun swinging from his belt.

"I'm grateful for your letter," Abbey said earnestly, "and for all you did to make Rolph comfortable at the last. But all the same I had to come. I had to see his grave."

Tay moved uncomfortably, trying mentally to pigeon-hole this strange mixture of female, who, he'd been told by her husband was a special grade of gold-plate, used to all the luxuries of big city existence. Why had she stepped out of character, to endure severe traveling hardships merely to see a wind-swept mound marked only with a plank telling a dead man's name and the date of his death.

LATE AFTERNOON sunshine struggled through the fly-specked window to single out the girl's pale beauty. The sight made Tay wonder why Rolph Dawson had ever left his wife at all. It hadn't been to seek his fortune, for Dawson had been well supplied with gold coins and currency which, even as near death as he was, he'd bragged to Tay had come from Abbey. "And there's always more where that came from," Rolph had stated.

At the time, Tay had cringed at the thought of a man living off a woman's subsidy, but he'd also reasoned that money might have been the reason for Rolph's leaving his Chicago home. The dying man had alluded to his wife's eternal talk of money. That alone was enough to drive a man away! Tay knew first hand a little about females used to wealth. He'd once been engaged to one—Ada Arnold of Philadelphia.

"Tell me again how it happened," Abbey Dawson broke into his reverie. "Tell me everything, please."

"I think I wrote all the details," Tay declared as he moved to rest one arm on the book shelves. He couldn't look at those troubled dark eyes just then. He concentrated on fingering odd papers tucked between the dusty volumes.

"You might think of something more."

"Your husband was on the stage that had stopped here to unload supplies for Monty Brand. Rolph got into an argument with a fellow from Gold City—a professional card player named La Verne. Rolph pulled a gun first; La Verne shot in self-defense. Your husband was too badly hurt to move on in the coach. He was dead a few hours later when Doc Layne finally got here from the Gulch. Doc gave me a hand with the burial."

"Did Rolph speak of me—send a message?" Abbey's tones were urgent. She leaned forward in her chair. Tay felt hot color rise in his face. He continued to avoid her eyes.

"There was no message—but I suppose Rolph didn't expect to die," he lied. "But he did tell me about you, and gave me your address. He talked about Chicago, too." Tay couldn't very well tell Abbey Dawson whom Rolph had actually talked most about those last hours—Mamie La Verne, a black-haired vixen from Gold City. He couldn't say Mamie's photo had been with Abbey's own in the wounded man's pocket, nor that the fatal bullet had been fired from her irate husband's gun! Tay had avoided any hint of such a thing in the letter he'd sent along to Abbey with Rolph's money and personal effects.

"He did carry my picture!" Abbey whispered. Tay could see why. Any man would have been proud to display her likeness.

For several moments silence weighed more heavily than the still summer closeness of the room. Tay moved to pick up Abbey's bag, and walked toward the leanto.

"You can sleep here," he stated. "There's a solid bolt on the door. The Indians camped near aren't always to be trusted—and an occasional road agent drifts this way."

"You spoke of Monty. Don't you own this place?" she asked, glancing at the law books again.

"No," Tay told her. "The owner, Monty Brand, got a letter on the same stage Rolph rode—a message about his brother's death in New Orleans. I agreed to take charge of the post while Monty was gone. He should have been back by now."

"You're a lawyer, aren't you?" her question came quickly.

Tay's eyes narrowed. *"Was,"* he corrected. "I gave up my practice in Philadelphia some two years ago. I'm a trapper, herd-trailer, cowpoke—anything to pick up a living since I came West."

"I've heard on my trip that this region is being settled rapidly—that it's good cattle country," Abbey commented as she went to stand at the open door. "I should think newcomers, with land purchases and leases, would need legal advice." Her face when she turned seemed lighted from some inner source.

"Fists and lead seem to pack more persuasion than the law," Tay muttered, as he settled his battered sombrero on his head preparatory to seeing about his horses. Sunset was already plastering the hill country with color, and pre-night cool was replacing the heat.

"May I see the grave now?" Abbey asked.

"Come along. It's not far," Tay answered.

TAY HAD to look away from the figure silhouetted against the setting sun. He fought down the old aching that her utter femininity had awakened inside him

. . . a long sublimated emotion he thought had died. Somehow, he kept seeing another woman, one with hair the color of ripe wheat. He was also recalling female inconstancy again—a girl promised to him, in another man's—a rich one's—arms. If Ada Arnold couldn't be true, after what she had meant to him, then no woman could, he thought bitterly. Not even this one, who knelt so piously beside a grave.

Abbey Dawson made a little sound. Tay glanced down to see her fingers tracing the already peeling paint on the words of the crude wooden grave marker. Her lips moved silently, and then she straightened to open her handbag. She handed a photo to Tay. The bit of cardboard trembled like a harried aspen leaf.

"I have to be sure," she said in a strained tone, as Tay took the photo from her slender fingers. "Is this the man you buried?"

It was almost like looking at Rolph Dawson in the flesh again, the likeness was so true—the thin, handsome features with their cocky mustache and side-burns, the crooked, appealing smile. There could be no mistake. Suddenly Tay wished he could lie to her, give Abbey a small hope, but he knew his own face had given him away.

"That's the one," he stated quickly, turning from the inevitable emotion he was sure would now claim the girl. Alone, Tay walked down the little hill. He waited by some dwarfed pines until she had caught up with him.

"I'll be gone for a short while, to check my horses," he told her, keeping his eyes straight ahead. After assuring himself that the three mustangs were still securely hobbled, and in their proper feeding ground, Tay sat down on a rock within sight of the little post, to let his thoughts wander.

THE SMELL of frying pork surprised his nostrils when he finally entered the log building. Abbey had changed into a crisp white muslin dress. The table was set, and fresh, aromatic coffee bubbled on the stove. Tay marveled at the mound of golden biscuits warming in a big black pan.

That was to be only his first moment of marvel, for during the next three days Abbey's deft hands moved constantly for their mutual comfort. "My mother came from a poor family," was her explanation. "She believed in teaching me practical things."

Tay didn't sleep nights thinking of that, and wondering anew at the deep-rooted emotion which had brought Abbey Dawson to the post. In fiction books, Tay had read of one-man women. It was obvious from her conduct toward him that Abbey Dawson was such a one. She hadn't mentioned Rolph's name since that visit to his grave. The fact didn't make her nearness any easier for Tay to endure, however.

Well, he couldn't tell her she was wasting her silent grief on a faithless character who had carried another woman's likeness next to his heart.

He couldn't remember what he had done with the cussed picture—burned it, Tay supposed, destroyed it past proving anything. And it would take some proving to shake devotion like Abbey's, even if it could now center only on a man who was as lifeless as the dirt mound Abbey had traveled so far to see!

The evening before Abbey's last day at the post, Tay was returning from the nearest ranch with fresh meat. He saw the lone horse hitched to the rail by the porch—an unfamiliar bronc. Tay quickened his own mount. Something about the ominous quiet of the place filled him with caution. Soundlessly he crept up to the open door. He could see a large man approaching Abbey threateningly.

"Don't take another step!" Abbey was saying in a controlled voice. One quick glance showed Tay that in her hand she was firmly clasping his gun, which he'd left with her.

Tay sprang into action. Although the ruffian outweighed him by a good twenty pounds, the fellow was no match for a man spurred by blind fury. Sounds of fists smacking bare flesh intermingled with gasping grunts. A few minutes later, a thoroughly frightened fugitive galloped hellbent down the road.

Tay wanted to tell Abbey how proud he was of her calmness, but she began immediately to administer to the deep cut on his

cheek bone—the touch of her quick, gentle hands sent all other thoughts from his mind.

MID-MORNING of the next day found them watching at the open door for the stage. Abbey was dressed in the soft silk frock again.

Tay walked with her to the coach, scarcely aware of Monty Brand's huge bulk alighting from the door. He busied himself with helping Abbey to her seat. Bill Chasteen was already easing the brakes when Tay moved quickly. He leaped into the Concord and settled beside Abbey.

To Chasteen's shouted queries and Monty's frankly puzzled ones, Tay waved a silencing hand. "I'm riding with Mrs. Dawson to Gold City. I'll be back to the post for my belongings in a few days, Monty!" he called.

The coach was moving rapidly before Tay spoke to Abbey.

"I know how you feel about Rolph," he began. "I know too, that it will take you a long time to get over him. But I couldn't let you go without telling you, Abbey, I love you very much."

A sigh escaped the soft lips as Abbey Dawson seemed to relax. "You were long enough getting around to saying it," she answered. Tay looked at her in delighted amazement.

"But . . . Rolph. You came all this way to see his grave!"

"It's hard to explain, Tay. I thought when I first met Rolph that I loved him . . . maybe I did. I'd had a lot of suitors, but I was the only child, and my father had wealth. It seemed to me the men I met were more interested in my money than in me. Rolph was different.

"My father objected to our marriage, but I had money in my own name, and we went ahead with our plans. For the first four years I told myself I loved him, in spite of the fact that he was content to live on my money and lost most of his charming, gentle ways. Then he would go away for months at a time."

"Abbey," Tay said. "I'm sorry for the unhappiness you've had. But truly, there's nothing now for you to worry about."

"Let me finish the story, Tay. I want you to know the whole thing. During Rolph's absences I'd grown used to going along alone. Then, just when I'd given him up for good, he'd be back, and the old torture would begin again."

The rolling wheels hit a deep rut, throwing the two passengers closer together. Tay took her hand in both of his.

"That's why I came out here to see Rolph's grave," she continued. "I had to convince myself that he'd never again tear my heart and my self-respect to shreds. He had affairs with other women, I know."

"You knew. . . ."

"Yes, I knew," she said, but in her voice there was no sadness now. "And I found the picture of the last one, Mamie LaVerne, inscribed to Rolph with such tenderness. It was tucked between your law books, and I came across it one day."

Then Tay remembered having stuck it in with the books; he mentally rebuked himself for not having burned the thing.

"But that's all over with, Tay," Abbey said, smiling at him. "I could tell when I first saw you that you'd been hurt at one time by a woman, as I'd been hurt by Rolph. I even suspect that the woman is the cause of your giving up your law practice."

"It was, but I'd almost forgotten until I saw you, Abbey. We can begin together again now. We can go East."

"Why, I love the West, Tay, and it's your kind of country. There's no limit to what a man of fortitude and education can do here. Wherever we go, I'll be happy."

His hand held hers tighter. "You're right, Abbey. After all, if a man has something to work for. . . ."

"And I did dust your law books—"

Smiling broadly, he nodded. "I'll be using them, too, from now on."

Tay's arm came around her small waist. The stage-coach had plunged out of the hills and was wheeling across open country now. To Tay Brown the sky seemed bluer, and the sun brighter, than ever before.

# RED EARTH, RED SKY

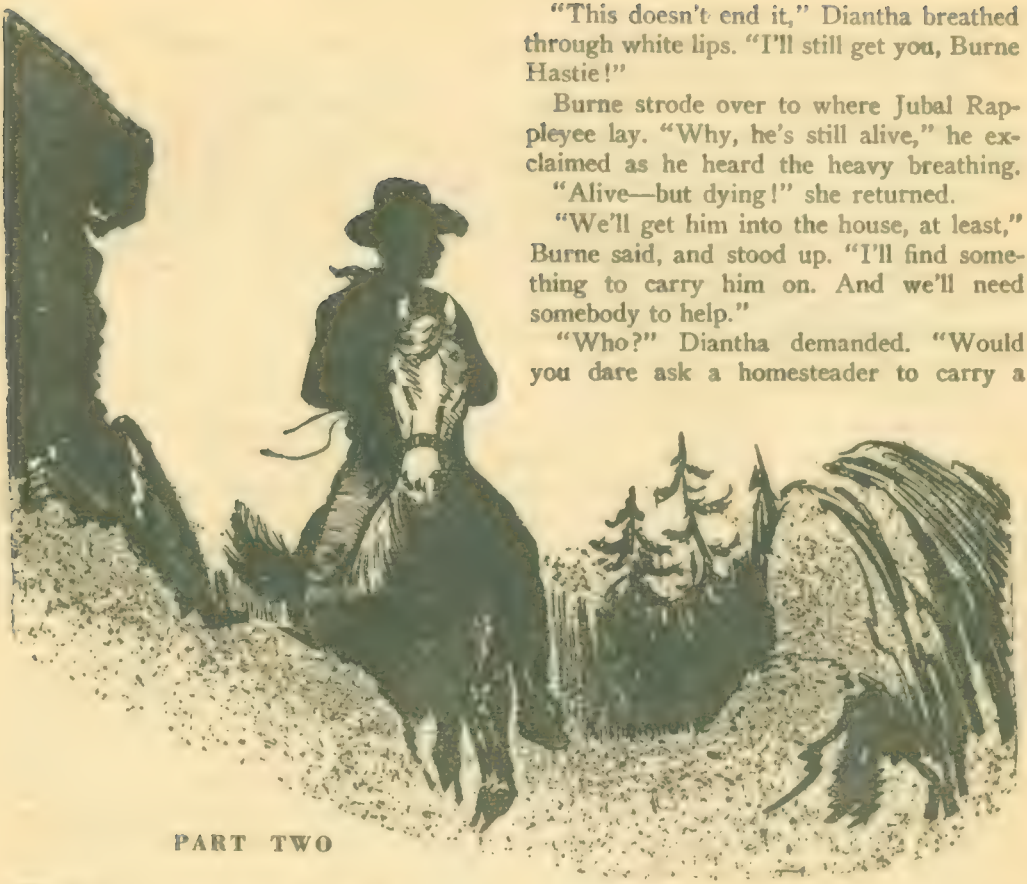
BY ISABEL STEWART WAY

**THE STORY SO FAR:**

BURNE HASTIE was a youngster in Green Sea Valley when CLETE COMARRA and the sheepmen raided the cattle land and killed Burne's father and brother, causing the subsequent death of his mother. Since that time Burne and the other homesteaders have waited their chance to reclaim their lands.

Burne and GRAMP HASTIE are the leaders of the band of homesteaders, twelve families now grown to thirty, who return years later to Green Sea for revenge. VEE, daughter of one of the sheepmen who was abandoned for lost in the long-ago raid, has grown up with Burne, raised by his mother and then his aunt. Burne is attracted by her dark vivacity, until he meets DIANTHA RAPPLEYEE, daughter of JUBAL RAPPLEYEE, a leading sheepman. Diantha, however, has nothing but contempt for him.

In the first bloody meeting of sheepmen and homesteaders, Gramp is mortally wounded by Clete .Comarra, whom Burne swears to kill. After an exchange of gunfire with an unknown assailant near the Winged-H, Burne's old home, he comes upon Diantha standing over her wounded father. She accuses Burne of having killed him and vows to kill Burne in return. As she raises her gun, Burne knows that she means it.



"This doesn't end it," Diantha breathed through white lips. "I'll still get you, Burne Hastie!"

Burne strode over to where Jubal Rappleyee lay. "Why, he's still alive," he exclaimed as he heard the heavy breathing.

"Alive—but dying!" she returned.

"We'll get him into the house, at least," Burne said, and stood up. "I'll find something to carry him on. And we'll need somebody to help."

"Who?" Diantha demanded. "Would you dare ask a homesteader to carry a sheepman into his own home to die? And if you asked a sheepman—would you risk the bullet you'd get, once the job was done?"

Burne gave a twisted smile at the truth of her jibing. Before he could answer, Diantha went on, "Vee is down near the corral. She helped me get the horses out."

"And you took help from her?"

"Would I let the horses roast alive, just to save my pride?"

"No, I guess you wouldn't. But you were ready to let your father lie out here rather than take my help."

"Because he'd want it that way."

BURNE shrugged, and strode down to the corrals. Vee was there, as Diantha had said. She was leaning on the corral fence, watching the flames; watching,

## PART TWO

BURNE tensed himself for the impact of the bullet, but he spoke rapidly. "Your father shot first, and from ambush. I thought he was farther ahead. You can't expect a man to hold his fire when another shoots at him first!"

"You're lying!" Her gun muzzle went up.

Burne shouted suddenly, and leaped aside as the gun spat its fire. While Diantha stood there, staring through the gunsmoke, Burne leaped in from the side. His hand whipped down, cruelly swift, and the edge of it came hard across her wrist. She gave a low cry of pain, and the next instant Burne was picking her gun and his own from the ground.

"It's not smashed," he told her, as he saw her holding onto her wrist with her other hand, "but it'll be bruised for a while. I wouldn't try to shoot anybody else if I were you."

although she must have known that Diantha had gone to meet him with a gun!

When she turned to him, and he glimpsed the queerly excited expression on her face, he had sudden wonder. "Vee!" he exclaimed. "Did you set fire to this barn?"

She shook her head and pulled away. "I rode back here after the shooting in the lane, and hid behind the shed yonder." She nodded toward a small building in the shadows that had been the harness shed when Burne was a boy. "I watched Diantha go to her father. I was waiting for her to get out of the lane, so I could follow you. Then my horse whinnied, and another one answered from near the barn. Right away I heard the crackling and saw the barn was on fire, so I helped get the horses out."

"You didn't hear anybody ridin' away?"

"I'm not sure. Seemed like somebody rode off to the south there, but I wasn't sure."

Burne looked around and shrugged again. Later, he'd try to track down the one who had set the fire, but now there was other work at hand. He ripped the shed door from its rawhide hinges. "Come on," he said. "You and Diantha can carry one end. She'll feel better if her father is in the house."

It wasn't an easy job, but Burne managed to get the big man onto the door and carry him into the house—the second man within a week brought inside these walls to die. They got him on the couch where Gramp had lain, and Burne did what he could for the wound, amazed that the man still lived. Diantha washed his face, poured water and whiskey between his dry lips, and Jubal's breath kept coming as if he fought not to leave his daughter.

Once, when Burne was alone with the man, he leaned over Jubal. "Don't worry about your daughter," he said in a low voice. "If you can hear me, then know that she'll be taken care of."

Then Diantha was back, paying no heed to Burne, but working desperately over the sick man.

Finally Vee came in. "The shooting seems over," she said. "And someone's coming—a bunch of riders. I think it's the homesteaders."

"Turn the lights down and wait here," Burne said, and went outside, hand on his gun. He walked toward the lane fence, and stopped as he heard a familiar voice. "Come on, you guys. If Burne and his grandfather couldn't live to take over their home, we'll do it for them!" It was Stu Hancock, a reckless young redhead who had grown up with Burne. Stu was married now and had three children, but it hadn't settled him down. "Come on, you men."

Burne leaped over the fence into the lane. "Hold up, Stu."

The riders stopped, and a queer silence fell over them. Stu said hoarsely, "Burne, what the devil? I don't believe in ghosts, but your name's on a wooden headboard over a grave out there. I saw it when I come scoutin'."

"An empty grave, Stu. I'm alive and kickin', and I'd have been into the scrap, but—" He stopped. Up till now he hadn't figured just what he'd tell, or how much. Now he decided to keep quiet about Jubal; he owed that much to the old sheepman. "Some fool set fire to the barn and almost caught me in it."

"Well, the fire's out, and the sheepmen have run to hell-'n'-gone to lick their wounds. That is, if you can reckon 'em as sheepmen when they ain't got any sheep. We mighty nigh cleaned the damned riff-raff out."

Burne, remembering the sheep pouring over the creek bank, nodded. "You sure did," he said.

"Well, let's go into your old home and celebrate," Ira Cobb spoke up. "We got one comin', by the holy blue-toed rooster—grievin' over the deaths of you and Gramp Hastie! Is Gramp—"

"He's gone," Burne said, grimly. "Clete Comarra ripped his belly open with a knife!"

SILENCE again, while thoughts of celebration seemed to trickle from them like water from a bullet-punctured keg. Burne said, "Let's ride around and take

over the cabins . . . see what needs doin' before the women come." He had to get them away from the Winged-H.

"Yeah. Nobody wants to sleep," Ira muttered. "It's a good way to pass the night."

Burne got his horse, and they rode out together across Green Sea to the other cabins. One after another they visited, and came at last to Stu Hancock's birthplace.

"Home again," Stu said simply, as he looked around. "I'll leave my bedroll on the bunk, boys. I'm comin' back after we've made the rounds."

On they rode, reclaiming the cabins, ridding them of the sheepmen's dust, and all the time the sense of homecoming grew stronger within them. A dozen families they'd been back there when the sheepmen drove them out, and they'd multiplied and waxed stronger. Boys had grown to men and married, and now thirty families would make homes in Green Sea. New cabins would have to be built, the land divided up, and they'd have a little world of their own.

"It's the valley of the world!" said Ira Cobb gruffly. "After we rid it of sheep-stench, we'll build it back to what it was."

"And nobody'll wrest it from us again!" Stu Hancock vowed.

Burne said, "Tomorrow we'll get it ready for the womenfolks, and we'll organize and lay our plans. Some of us must keep watch through the night. The sheepmen might come back."

A couple of men volunteered, then Stu Hancock said, "I'll come if I hear shooting, but I'm staying under my own roof through the rest of this night!"

Ira Cobb grunted, "Me, too!" and suddenly a great eagerness seemed to seize them all, each to sleep under his own roof. So, after agreeing on the watches and on a signal, they scattered.

THUS it was that Burne Hastie found himself riding back, toward dawn, to where a yellow-haired girl must be waiting with her dead.

He turned his horse into the corral, and went through the back door, across the quiet kitchen, to the open front-room door, his gaze going to the couch. It was empty. The room was empty. The bright rugs, some of the furniture, the curtains—were all gone.

"Diantha!" he called suddenly, but he knew, even as he called, that she wasn't there.

Vee was, though. She sat up in the big old chair that had been Gramp's, years before, and yawned sleepily. Her dark hair was tousled, her eyes black-pupiled, like a cat's. "They've gone, Burne."

"Where — and how?" he demanded roughly.

"The herder Basco helped lift the old man into the wagon-bed," she said, with another yawn. "Then he loaded their stuff into his own wagon, and they left. I guess they didn't want to be here when the homesteaders came."

"But her father—was he alive?" he asked incredulously.

Vee nodded. "Just like he was. I guess he wanted to die among his own kind."

"What'd you let her go for?"

Vee became a sudden spitfire. "What do I care what happens to her?" she flared. "What does she matter to us, Burne?" She came close, threw back her head as she looked at him from slumbrous jade eyes. "Let her go. Comarra's old enough to be her father, but she'll be the wife of your enemy, Burne."

"She'll be his widow!" Burne vowed, sick with hatred.

"Sure, she will." Vee came closer, put her arms about Burne's neck. For a moment they stood there, then Burne's arms went about her and he kissed her, and all other thought slipped away.

Through the silence, a clock struck. Burne looked over to the old Seth Thomas on the mantle, one that had been left behind years ago, when his mother fled . . . and it had been left behind tonight, when Diantha fled from the house.

It brought back reality, a sense of danger; this moment had become too intimate. He lifted his head and reached up to take Vee's arms from about his neck.

"I'm goin' out to the shed to get some sleep," he said shortly, and left. As he passed back through the kitchen, he saw the food piled on the table. Half a sack of coffee, part of a square of bacon, a loaf of bread. Diantha, knowing that he had no provisions, had divided her precious store.

DAWN was grey in the sky when Burne fell asleep; the sun was scarcely over the horizon when its rays awoke him again. But he had no desire to sleep more. This was a great day and he wanted to be part of it.

He looked over the charred ruins of the barn, walked around it, and at the back he found the hoof-prints of a horse. They led away into an old stream-bed that meandered back toward the main creek. When Burne followed it, he found tracks coming as well as going—tracks that had come down the bank from the old pasture land.

Burne's jaw set tight. The man who had set fire to the barn had come from over near the lane, from the spot where Jubal Rappleyee had been shot. Burne recalled the night before and the gunfire just ahead, the horse running off. That horse must have been empty-saddled—Jubal's.

Maybe he hadn't shot Jubal, after all. Maybe somebody waited here to ambush Jubal—and tried to get Burne, himself. Then, when Burne went on, the killer rode back down the old creek-bed and set fire to the barn. Just why, Burne couldn't tell until he discovered who had done the shooting and the burning. It must have been a homesteader, yet why would a homesteader set fire to Winged-H property, knowing it belonged to Burne? On the other hand, why would a sheepman kill one of his own?

It was too big a puzzle to figure out now, when there was so much to be done. But of this much he was glad—there was a chance he hadn't shot Jubal, after all.

BURNE slipped into the kitchen and made himself a quick breakfast, then rode out into the valley to take stock. He veered around by the creek, where the sheep pile-up had occurred the night before. They were still there, their bodies a soggy mass, damming the creek. That would be a dirty job the sheepmen left behind them; the creek would have to be cleared before pollution spread to the springs.

There was plenty to do all about them. The dead sheep had to be cleared away, cabins repaired, yards cleaned. Ira Cobb found a plow, and even though it was left by a sheepman he began using it, to get the feel of breaking his own ground.

When night came, they met and discussed plans. Louie Dorning, a tow-headed unmarried man who'd been a mere baby when they were driven from Green Sea, had recklessly ridden after the sheepmen. They were all heading for the high reserve, he said—the sheepherders in their wagons, following the remnants of their flocks. There'd be little danger from attack from them until fall. They'd taken their womenfolks with them.

"Plenty time to get ready for them," Burne said, his jaw tightening when he thought of Clete Comarra. "Right now we've got to make crops to carry us and our stock through the winter. The grazing will never be what it was, so we've got to depend on crops."

Once again Green Sea Valley was changing, Burne thought, as he rode slowly home that night. First there had been the wild horses running free through the high waves of grass that billowed greenly under the breeze; then the Indians, taking what horses they needed, but leaving to the earth her richness. After the Indians the cattlemen came, claiming vast acres, using only enough to answer their needs . . . for what use raising great herds when buyers were so far away?

That had been the life, Burne thought regretfully. His father and Gramp had been like heads of an empire, as had every other man in the valley. But the sheepmen had stopped that—and now the sheepmen were driven out, leaving a ravaged valley behind them. Never again would the grass ripple waist-high to a man, for now the homesteaders must lay the valley to plow fur-

rows. Man-made crops would force the earth to yield again, but always the harvest would fall below the richness of her own giving.

The crops must be fenced against the stock, so each man's land would be divided from the other's. The day of the plowman was here. Progress would come, and this would be a good place in which to live.

All the same, Burne sighed as he looked over the wide valley—whose earth was red with blood.

THE WORK progressed. The womenfolks came in the wagons with their household supplies, the seeds for planting, the tools for tilling the soil. Smoke curled from stone chimneys through the days, and windows glowed yellow at night. Plow furrows made growing brown streaks that spread to checkerboard squares on the valley floors; clothes flapped lazily from clotheslines, and children waded along the creek and made fishpoles out of willow saplings.

Summer came swiftly, and the brown squares turned green. In the small coves along the rimming hills—miraculously overlooked by the sheep—cattle and horses grazed. Men began clearing out the old schoolhouse, and Aunt Minty made out a list of books; she'd been a schoolteacher in her youth, and would take up the job again.

There was much to be done in Green Sea Valley, and much that was needed. They were raising food—vegetables, fowl and meat—but the luxuries, the coffee and sugar and flour, were running short, and there wasn't money enough to buy more. Money was a great lack; in fact, it was their foremost problem, although they were working toward a goal, and everyone seemed happy despite privations. Even the excitement of getting ready for the sheepmen when they came back in the fall gave life a tang.

Everything was going smoothly, yet in Burne there was always the wonder about Diantha Rappleyee. Was she Clete Comarra's wife now? When he thought of that, a dull anger burned within him, and his hatred toward the swarthy giant was intensified until he knew that no peace could come to him while Clete Comarra lived.

Yes, that's why his life had been spared . . . so that he could come back and deal out retribution to Clete Comarra. So far, Comarra had escaped, but the time would come.

There were times, too, when Burne knew a gnawing loneliness. He felt it mostly when he went home at night. Aunt Minty was always there, cheerful and capable, preparing his meals, keeping his home—but he knew he was missing something. It was time he married and settled down. There was Vee, right at hand, but he wasn't sure he wanted Vee for his wife. She was exciting, piquant, but even when she was in his arms, he wasn't satisfied. It was like a man coming home, ravenous with hunger, and finding the table stacked only with sweets.

The summer waned, and a grimness began to creep over the valley as the homesteaders realized it was now time to prepare for the sheepmen's return. It would mean battle, and death for some, without doubt.

BURNE was filled with thoughts of what lay ahead as he rode along the homeward trail that late afternoon. He'd been making the rounds of his neighbors, calling a meeting at the schoolhouse on the following Saturday night to discuss ways and means of holding their own. The men had been eager, full of plans.

He pulled up shortly as a dog ran out of the brush, barking. The sorrel shied and reared, and Burne cursed the dog harshly. He started to drive it away from the sorrel's heels with his whip, then all at once he straightened in the saddle. It was the grey Ruff, Diantha's sheep dog! From close by sounded a low whistle, and the dog stopped barking.

Burne wheeled his mount into the shadows of a butte, dismounted. "Here, Ruff," he said, and the dog came to him, tail wagging. Burne felt his pulse quicken. Diantha must be somewhere close.

Another whistle sounded, and Ruff turned and trotted away. Burne followed cautiously, but a twig snapped under his feet, and almost in the same breath, a shot sounded, straight ahead. Burne felt the breeze of it, riffling by his head, and he leaped aside, waiting. There was quiet, and then suddenly a horse leaped into movement as somebody rode recklessly away, keeping to the shadows of the hills.

It wasn't Diantha, Burne was sure. He fired twice, then cursed himself for a fool as a gun roared again from close by, and a bullet knocked the gun from his hand. So there were two of them. . . . and one had got away. Well, this one wouldn't.

He reached forward for his gun—had to leap sidewise to escape the next shot, and the next instant he was plunging forward in a fierce rush. For the last fire had come from in close, and his rush carried him to the figure crouching there.

Taken unexpectedly, the man crashed to the ground, but he was not overwhelmed. He was no man of great size, but he had muscles of steel and the agility of an eel. He fought fiendishly, using fists and knees, and Burne had his hands full. He'd knocked the other's gun from his grasp on that first lunge, but sheepmen often carried knives, and he dared not give the man a chance to do what Comarra had done to Gramp. Burne's right hand was numb from the shock of that last bullet, but he lashed out with his fists, pommeling the writhing figure that grappled him. His only chance lay in pressing the man, giving him no time to bring his knife into play.

Burne's left fist found its mark, a crashing blow aimed at the temple, but the other was fast; he recoiled and robbed the blow of much of its power. And he was reaching under his left armpit—for the knife.

Burne pressed closer, striking swiftly with his good left, keeping the other on the defensive. Finally he connected squarely with a hard left, after feinting his enemy into position with his injured right. The other went down, full-length, but he bounced up again and bored in, using his fists, his arms, trying to throw Burne off balance long enough to bring his knife into play. He hit Burne a solid smash in the mouth and Burne tasted blood and spat out a tooth.

Burne came back with another feint with his right, a glancing blow on the jaw with his left, and the man went down. "Damn you!" the other jarred out as he leaped to his feet. Burne saw that his eyes were on Burne's injured right, craftily; he thought Burne couldn't use it. Burne gritted his jaw against the pain, feinted with his left, then smashed his right hard against the man's exposed temple, and the fight was over.

FIGHTING off the nausea that pain brought, and rubbing his throbbing right hand, Burne stood a moment, then picked up his gun; he dragged the other man out of the shadows into the moonlight. Lighting a match, he looked into the other's face. It was Basco, his features battered and bloody, his mouth swollen, while his black, velvety eyes opened to stare up at Burne with a queer steadiness.

"I ought to shoot you," Burne rasped out. "Sneakin' in here to spy on us!"

Basco shrugged, sat up stiffly. "I didn't come to spy you out. I come to get supplies." His voice was defiant.

"Supplies?" Burne echoed, then gave an involuntary whistle as realization came. Of course! The sheepmen had left so hurriedly that there'd been no time to gather proper supplies. Now they were in actual want. "Where'd you expect to get your supplies? Steal them?"

"Maybe, if I didn't find enough in my own cache. Even sheepmen don't like to see women starve if they can help it."

Burne looked at him, tried to keep his voice casual. "Diantha Rappleyee—did she stay with you after her father died?"

Basco shrugged in insolent silence. Burne's hands instinctively knotted to fists, but he held himself in check. "Who's with you?" he demanded. "Comarra? I heard a horse riding away." Sternly he thrust all thought of Diantha away. "Who was it?"

Basco's battered features twisted to a derisive grin, but still he didn't answer. Burne reached down, jerked him to his feet. "You're not worth killin'!" he rasped. "Get goin' with your supplies. But remember this—I've owed you a small debt because you let my grandfather live long enough to die in his own home, as he wished. Now the debt is paid. If ever you come prowlin' here again, I'll shoot you at sight."

Basco walked away, swaggering in spite of his lameness. A moment later Burne heard the sound of his departure along the trail. He stood still, frowning, and thought of Diantha could no longer be pushed from his mind. Why hadn't he forced Basco to tell him about her? For suddenly he knew that he had to learn about Diantha. After all, hadn't he promised Jubal that he need have no worries about his daughter, that she'd be cared for?

Burne himself had made that promise. It was another debt he owed, even if she was wed to the man he had to kill.

Burne mounted again, slowly, for the fight had taken its toll of him, too. Remembering that other who had fled on horseback, he kept to the shadows. Back at the Winged-H, he unsaddled and went into the kitchen. Aunt Minty was asleep, so he tiptoed about, throwing food into a gunnysack. Good food; luxuries. Sugar, coffee, a bit of Aunt Minty's precious tea. Women liked such things.

That done, he went outside to saddle a fresh mount. Just inside the corral gate he saw a horse standing, sides heaving, head down. He climbed over and examined the animal. It was Vee's mare, and she was sweat-lathered. Moreover, when he led her into the barn and lighted a lantern, he found the crease of a bullet across her withers.

"Well, I'm be damned," he jerked out, and a slow fury filled him as he cared for the beast. He remembered the rider galloping away through the night, and how Basco had fired to draw his attention. And he recalled Vee's words, back there. *"There's a herder . . . beautiful, with dark curly hair."*

"Why, the little fool," Burne ground out. "And leavin' the mare uncared for, besides!" He didn't know, that moment, which made him angrier—her meeting with a sheepherder, or her neglect of the mare.

HIS RAGE still smouldered as he saddled up Gramp's grey and rode out, taking the fresh trail out of the valley. Basco had a couple of hours' start, but toward dawn Burne sighted him and his packhorse a little ahead, and from then on he kept the other in sight, resting when Basco rested, traveling when he traveled.

Always higher into the mountains they journeyed, through still cedar forests, past thundering mountain streams and through passes that time had cleft from giant boulders. Finally, late in the afternoon, the trail began to drop again. At sunset he found himself looking down upon green meadows, held like a green cup in the heart of the high mountain peaks.

Sheep grazed contentedly, in little bands held together by dogs. Small camps were made about the meadow, and supper fires were burning. But there was little to cook; Burne realized that from the excited eager way they ran toward Basco when they saw him coming.

Burne stood there, watching, but he had only half an eye for the men; he was looking for a fair-haired girl who must be down there, somewhere. Diantha probably belonged to the man who was his enemy—and when she glimpsed him, she would have only contempt and hatred in her eyes—but he had to see her.

Shadows gathered as he crouched there, watching, and the early moon came up to make magic of the night. Voices drifted up from below, but none that could have belonged to Diantha. Anxiety tightened in Burne's throat.

The grey whinnied, and Burne realized how tired the animal must be. Unsaddling, he hid his gear under a fallen tree, led him over to a small stream, and picketed him there. He took a little food for himself, washed it down with water, and was just

starting back to take up his vigil again, when he heard someone riding toward him.

Hand on gun butt, he whirled, and found himself looking at Diantha Rappleyee. She was thinner, older-looking, almost ethereal in beauty.

He strode toward her. "Diantha," he said in a low voice.

For a moment it seemed as if her face brightened, and her hand reached in a small gesture toward him, but before he could be sure, the welcome was all gone.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded sharply.

"I came to see—about you. I promised your father I'd look after you."

"Where he lay after you shot him!"

"Diantha, listen!" he spoke tensely. "Somebody else was there—somebody who set fire to the barn right afterwards. I saw a horse's hoofprints the next mornin'. I don't think I killed your father, Diantha."

"No, you didn't kill him!" she broke in scathingly. "You only condemned him to a living death!"

"You mean he's still alive?"

"Yes. Alive and helpless. Crippled from a bullet in his spine. He's suffering."

Burne stared, but knew a moment's relief. Even helpless, Jubal would be a protection to his daughter.

"Why did you come up here?" he asked. "If you'd taken your father to a doctor, down below, he might have been helped."

"I had no other place to take him—if you've any sense you know that. A few of our sheep escaped, and I had to look after them."

There was bitter silence between them for a moment, then Burne said, "I know you're short of provisions, Diantha, so I brought you a few things."

"I want nothing from you, Burne Hastie," she blazed. "We're not beggars, wanting charity. We've got money to buy our own!"

"But there's no place to buy," he reminded her, "and I brought things a sick man would enjoy."

She looked away, and Burne saw the moment's indecision on her face. Before he could press the point, there was the muffled sound of hoofs on the trail.

"Get out of sight," Diantha whispered quickly. Dismounting, she caught his hand and drew him behind a butte, and while they waited there, she let her hand stay in Burne's. When he moved closer, until their shoulders touched, she didn't draw away.

THE RIDER came closer, slowly, and Burne saw the huge silhouette of Clete Comarra, his head moving from side to side as if in search of somebody.

"If he's lookin' for me—" he said in a harsh whisper.

"Not you," Diantha whispered back, and her body seemed to stiffen.

So that was it! Clete Comarra had followed Diantha. Burne's hatred and fury suddenly boiled over. Dropping the girl's hand, he pushed her farther back, and leaped forward into the path of the other.

"Lookin' for somebody, Comarra?" he asked.

The big man pulled up so suddenly that his horse reared. "Goddlemighty" he ripped out. "I thought—" His hand went to the bib of his overalls, and came out with a knife.

If Comarra thought Burne had come back from that grave beside Gramp's, at least the giant showed no fear. He flung himself from his horse and lunged toward Burne, a string of profanity ripping from his lips.

Burne jerked out his gun, whipped it down across Comarra's wrist, and the knife went flying. Burne raised the gun again, but Comarra's long left arm reached out, the huge fingers closed about Burne's wrist, twisting it. The gun dropped.

As Burne bit his lips against the gasp of pain, he cursed himself for being too weak-hearted to shoot when he had had the chance. The agony of the big hand twisting his arm made cold sweat stand out on Burne's face, but he kept to his feet and lashed out with his other fist—blows that landed on the huge scowling face, but seemed not to be felt.

Then, with a roar, Comarra gave a sudden jerk, and Burne was on the ground; the breath was knocked from him when Comarra threw his great weight upon him. The world spun as his lungs struggled for more air, and he was but dimly conscious of the blows that beat down upon him.

Instinct kept Burne struggling. His hands reached out and felt Comarra's knife. His fingers found the handle, closed about it; summoning all his strength, he rolled over, so swiftly that he caught the other man off guard; but only for a moment, then the big sheepman clamped down again. Burne had rolled enough to give him room to lift his arm, and he felt the knife cutting through Comarra's flesh.

He had slashed Clete Comarra's cheek. Burne saw the red mark outlined for an instant, in the moonlight, before the blood gushed out, turning the whole face dark. Comarra put his hand up, then took it away and stared at it stupidly—and in that instant Burne slammed his fist out and into the big face with all the force he could use. Then he was rolling out of Comarra's way, and up to his feet.

Still holding the knife, Burne circled over to where his gun lay gleaming in the moonlight—once he had it in his hand, he could give orders. He turned, and saw that Comarra had crawled to his feet, shaking with fury.

"Mount your horse—and git!" he told Clete Comarra.

"We'll meet again," Comarra said, "and I'll wring your neck with my bare hands!"

"We'll meet, all right" Burne gritted, "but who wrings whose neck remains to be seen. And don't plan on bringin' any trouble to Green Sea this fall! You can cross the valley—the law says you got the right, and we're law-abidin' folks—but once you start anything, we'll be ready. And you'd best leave your womenfolks behind."

"I'll fetch or leave my womenfolks as I see fit," Comarra growled as he mounted; then he rode away without looking back, and Burne stared after him. Clete Comarra had no womenfolks—yet. . . .

HE STRODE over to the butte where Diantha huddled, white-faced. "You are all bruised and battered," she said. "There's a pool here where you can wash the dirt off, then I'll give you balm for it. I carry some in the saddle bags."

Burne went with her, and after he'd washed in the icy mountain water, she spread a smooth salve made from mutton tallow and herbs, and the hurt lessened.

"Thank you," he said, when it was done. Then he stood there, filled with a strange awkwardness, his throat tight under the burden of words that wanted to be spoken. Finally he said, "I wish you'd stay behind, Diantha, when they drive the sheep back through the valley. I don't want you in any trouble."

She flung back her head. "Why must you always count on trouble when you meet any of us?"

"Trouble always comes when sheepmen and cattlemen meet." His mouth went tight. "And you, without your father's protection—"

"And why am I without his protection?" She drew back. "Because you shot him. After he saved you, you shot him."

"Diantha, I tell you there was somebody else there."

"And I don't believe you! It was you or one of your own kind—no sheepman would try to kill my father."

There was a small silence, and then she said tensely, "If you're done with your spying, you'd better go." She walked over to her horse and mounted before he could help her. "Clete will be back as soon as he can gather his men."

"Diantha." He walked over to her. "Does there have to be enmity between us? After all, you gave me shelter once."

"I'll regret it to my dying day!" She quirted her mount and rode swiftly away.

Burne shrugged, went over for his gear, saddled the tired grey, and mounted. He saw the gunnysack of food he'd brought, and it was up against the big butte, with Diantha's small cape upon it

Well, she'd come back for the cape and she'd not let the food lie here, wasting,

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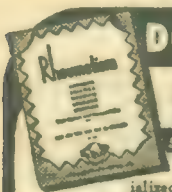

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when her father hungered. Suddenly he wanted to leave her something else. He took off his black Stetson, regarded the hatband of tooled leather with the bright silver trim. It would be of small account to a girl—a sheepgirl—but it was all he had. Taking the hatband off, he stepped down and wound it about the cape, and he felt a little better as he rode away.

THE GREY was tired. Once away from the sheep camp, Burne turned off the trail and found a spot where water and grazing were at hand. There he rested, and let the horse catch his wind. At dawn he started on, and late in the afternoon he rode up the lane of the Winged-H.

Aunt Minty came running, her curly grey hair disarranged, her eyes red as if she'd been crying. "Burne Hastie, where have you been?" she demanded. "Leaving without a word! And we heard shooting the night before you left—"

"A damned sheepherder came down to spy us out."

His gaze went to Vee, who had followed Aunt Minty outside.

"What happened to him? What happened, Burne?" Vee pressed close to him. "You—didn't get hurt, Burne?"

He saw the tension in her green eyes, remembered the lathered mare in the corral. "*I* didn't get hurt," he said with cruel emphasis as he pushed Vee away. "Ride around and tell the women to come to the meetin' tonight, too, Vee," he said roughly. What he had to present might need a lot of discussion—and persuasion—and women were good at that. He turned to Aunt Minty. "I'm hungry. Haven't eaten since last night."

"You took food enough for—" She stopped at the sight of his grim face. "Come on. There's plenty fixed."

The small schoolhouse was packed that evening, with all the families gathered there. More than at any other time, Green Sea Valley seemed an established place of homeloving people.

By common consent they pushed Burne

to the front. "You got the latest news," Stu Hancock said. "You take charge."

Burne faced them. "No use wastin' time," he said. "We all know why we're here—to plan our future course of action."

"Ain't but one way open," stocky Ira Cobb spoke up. "That's to finish wipin' 'em out. Long's we got them lookin' at Green Sea with greedy eyes, we can't make this place what we want to."

"That's right," long, lanky, Fred Jolley, another young family man, agreed. "We can't feel free and easy till they're gone."

"We'll be primed to finish 'em," Stu Hancock nodded. "Now tell us what you found out about 'em, Burne."

"They're in bad shape," Burne said slowly, thinking of Diantha's thinness. "Their flocks are small, and they have few provisions. They need everything."

"Not for long," Fred Jolley laughed to a chorus of assents.

"There's another way." Burne's voice went sharp. "We need money. The only way we can get it is through the sheepmen."

"What do you mean by that?" said Stu.

"I mean we can bargain with them. Sell them our extras. Let them through—on terms of peace."

"You're crazy," Ira Cobb burst out. "We're farmin' the land now because it's been ruined for straight cattle raisin'. But we're all cattlemen at heart, and there'll never be compromise between cattlemen and sheepmen! It's against human nature! As long as Camarra and his goddam vultures are runnin' loose, we got to carry guns while we work. And guns and plows don't mix, neither."

"That's right," someone shouted. "Besides, we got nothin' to sell—yet."

"We will have, in the years to come," Burne reminded them. "And we've got to have buyers. That's what I'm looking forward to. No, hear me out. In the old days our folks were hampered because they were too far from markets. Well, so are we. Some day there'll be a railroad through, but now we got to haul everything forty

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miles before we can sell it. That's hard, so what we need is to have our market come to us."

"I'd not sell food to a starvin' sheepman," Stu Hancock shouted, shoving his hand belligerently through his red mop of hair.

BURNE paid no heed. "We can scrape the bottom of the barrel this year and sell to the sheepmen, on condition that they move on peaceably. They're desperate enough to come to terms, I think. That'll give us cash to send for the supplies we need—fencin', tools, seed, and clothes for your women and kids."

"So we're to furnish food to let 'em live—to wipe us out later," Fred Jolley said bitterly.

"No, not wipe us out—but buy our crops. They must know now they can't drive us out. And they'll learn by compromisin' that they can get their provisions here."

"Look here, Burne Hastie!" Ira Cobb shouted, and the uproar quieted. "Clete Comarra and his gang of skunks killed your pa and your brother . . . they drove you and your ma away from your home. They done the same with the rest of us . . . and just last spring he killed your gramp. Now you want to let 'em come crawlin' till we fill their dastardly bellies."

Burne's eyes went hard. "There'll be no compromise between Clete Comarra and me. That fight will be finished. As for the others—they were his tools. Some of them weren't even here when Comarra moved in on us . . . they shouldn't have to pay for his deviltry." His thoughts went to crippled Jubal Rappleyee, who had saved his life, and to fair-haired Diantha.

"Looks like you've turned yellow," Stu Hancock yelled. He stopped when he saw his wife on her feet.

Lucy Hancock's dark eyes blazed as she faced her young husband. "Whether Burne Hastie's turned yellow or not," she declared vehemently, "he's talkin' sense, and you're goin' to listen. We want to live in

Green Sea . . . make homes, rear our children in peace. We can't do that in a range war! Even if you won, some of you menfolks'd be killed, and which of us women know who'll be the widows?"

"That's right!" Anne, Fred Jolley's usually gentle wife, was speaking earnestly. "You won one fight . . . now you're hungerin' for more bloodshed, and we'll not have it if there's any way out! Let's try Burne's way, at least. We can spare some cornmeal and beans, and I can kill off a half dozen turkeys. And we got more hay than we'll need!"

"Our cow dropped twin calves that can be vealed," called another woman.

"We got a porker we can butcher!" Lucy Hancock declared. "And we got extry hay."

"We ain't sellin' fodder to any stinkin' sheepmen!" Stu yelled his defiance.

"Put it to a vote!" Anne Jolley demanded tensely. She was a slim, beautiful woman, with enormous dark eyes and flaxen hair wrapped about her head. "And we women got the right to have our say, too! We live here—work here. We aim to vote!"

There was argument, shouting, almost fighting, but finally out of the disorder came the sullen agreement to put the matter to a vote, and to let the women take part. Silently Louie Dorning and his uncle, Joe Dorning, a middle-aged man, went about collecting votes. Then they counted them, and Louie announced, grim-faced, "Burne Hastie's plan carried by four votes . . . and by damn, it better be a good one!"

Burne stood silent, filled with sudden doubt. Then he looked at the women before him—women who might be widowed if another range war raged—and he felt more sure of himself.

"They'll be fetchin' the sheep down soon," he said, "because they're almost starved out. We'd best get ready now. Let each one bring what he wants to sell to the schoolhouse here, and put a price on it. We'll watch, meet the sheepmen, give our terms. After all," looking at the scowling men who had opposed his plan, "we can still shoot, if it don't pan out!"

SO IT WAS settled, and for the next week food poured into the schoolhouse. Not in large quantities, but in the small amounts each family could spare. Often it was more than could be spared, Burne knew, because so much was needed.

"We can tighten our belts this one winter," Lucy Hancock laughed, "as long as it means gettin' ahead."

The prices they set were high, but Burne made no protest. The sheepmen had money, Diantha had said; they'd undoubtedly made big money through the past years, and hadn't felt the loss of the sheep that had perished in Green Sea. That pinch would come next spring, when the lamb and wool crops would be small. Now they'd have to buy at any price.

A week after the meeting, Burne started for the high reserve again, but halfway up he found the sheep being held in a small cove where grazing was good. It was a bit early to bring them out, but the sheepmen were probably hungry.

Burne rode into the cove, up to the group of men gathered near the campfire. He spread his empty hands to show he was unarmed, but one of the herders grabbed a gun as he drew to a stop.

"Don't bother," he said. "I'm not here to start anything."

His gaze swept the men. Clete Comarra wasn't here; neither was Diantha among the few sheep-camp women. Jubal Rappleyee lay propped against a wagon tongue, and his eyes were hot with hatred as he stared at Burne.

"You're out of food," he said flatly, "and we've plenty—coffee, flour, bacon. You're in no shape to oppose us."

"Who says we're not?" growled one of the men.

Burne ignored him. "We're all set down there to finish wipin' you out—maybe we should—but I've come to make a deal. We'll sell you food, let your sheep go through the valley unharmed, as long as you start no trouble!"

"Suppose we tell you to go to hell!" rasped a grizzly man in greasy overalls. "Suppose we got our own plans!"

Burne shrugged. "I'd advise you to think it over. Fightin'll mean bloodshed—loss to all of us." He looked at Jubal. "Tell your leader I'm offerin' passage to you and yours, but when that's done, my fight with him has just begun." He wheeled his horse. "And take care one of you don't lose your head and shoot me in the back."

He rode away, then, swiftly. The flesh along his spine crept, expecting a bullet to ram into it any second Once he heard Jubal's quick, gruff voice, and suspected he was holding some hothead in check, but Burne didn't look back.

As he rode homeward, he saw bunched tracks of a quick-traveling horse covering his own trail of the morning. Later, when he was down-grading on the switchback, he glimpsed a rider lower down, and his mouth twisted to an oath. It was Basco—probably on his way to Vee. Burne didn't want Vee for a wife, but thought of her meeting a sheepherder still filled him with fury. . . .

Burne told the homesteaders that the sheep would reach the valley in about four days, and they made ready—for turning storekeepers, or for spilling blood.

It was at midnight on the third night when Burne heard horses' hoofs in the lane. He tumbled out of bed, ran to the porch, saw the group of riders, their faces cold and angry.

"What the hell?" he asked sharply.

"It was your plan," Stu said.

"You got all our stuff together," Ira Dobb broke in furiously. "You had us strip ourselves, and now they got it—Comarra's damned gang! They busted into the schoolhouse tonight and got it all! And look!" He pointed toward the schoolhouse.

Burne turned, stared at the red glow of fire. . .

"Lucy saw it," Stu went on. "But when we got there it was too late—except to see it was cleaned out, and an old dirty sheepskin left to mock us!"

Burne looked at the fire without answering for a moment. Folks could tighten their belts for one winter, Lucy Hancock had laughed, as long as it meant getting ahead. Now they'd tighten their belts from hopeless hunger, and all the things they needed so desperately were farther away than ever.

He looked back, ready to tell them he was sorry, but when he saw their faces, he knew it would do no good. For hatred was etched on every face, hatred blazed from every pair of eyes. Hatred for him. And these were his own people.

*(To be continued in the next issue)*

# KNOW YOUR WEST

*Answers to the questions on page 74*

1. No. Ravens are shiny black, like crows. Buzzards are brown or dull black with no feathers on their heads.

2. Mochila is Spanish for knapsack. Pony Express mochilas were large leathers with roomy pockets, made to fit on over the saddle.

3. Brushpopper, limb-skinner, brush-buster, brush-whacker, brush-thumper, brush-splitter, mesquite-mauler, brush-hand, brusheroo, thicket-thumper, chaparralero, etc.

4. Colorado.

5. Idaho.

6. The first joint above the thigh of a horse's hind leg is called the stifle.

7. Stake a horse to it. A putto is a wooden stake driven into the ground to which the horse's rope is tied. A stake pin.

8. No. Levis is the brand name of the Levi Strauss Co. Several other companies also manufacture blue denim riding jeans.

9. Small metal tags to be clamped on the ears of sheep or cattle, particularly purebred stuff, for indentification.

10. A cow gentle enough to be milked.

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IN ITS first year as a show for professional as well as amateur cowboys the Livingston Open Roundup won a place for itself among Montana's top shows.

To the general satisfaction of the crowd, the all-around trophy went to a Montanan, John Reynolds, who tied for first in saddle bronc-riding, took third in bareback and second in Brahma bull-riding, thereby enriching himself by $890.25.

Jiggs Burk collected $790 for his second place in calf-roping and first in steer-wrestling. Right behind him ($671) was Bill Weeks who polished off both bareback and bull-riding in first place. Other winners were Vern Meeks, with whom Reynolds split first place in saddle bronc-riding, Hal Churchill, champ calf-roper, and Delmar Assay, champ cow-milker—wild, that is.

From Livingston, Reynolds went on to Lewistown, where he rode off with another all-around title and first place in both bareback and saddle bronc-riding. All the bareback money stayed right in the state, all the money riders being Montanans.

In calf-roping at Lewistown the winner was Buddy Groff, in bulldogging Hobert Flowers and in bull-riding Buttons Leach.

A 20-year-old Oklahoma cowboy, Eddie Ackridge, found our Canadian neighbors very neighborly indeed. As reported previously in this column he covered himself with glory at the Calgary, Alta., Stampede. From there he rode the southern Alberta circuit, eight shows, winding up at the Medicine Hat Stampede with enough points to become a triple title holder. Eddie is the circuit's all-around champ, bareback bronc-riding champ and bull-riding champ, all at once.

We hope Eddie has at least three horses back in Oklahoma, because he now has three more flower-stamped saddles than he started off with. He also has some $2,500 more than he started off with, not counting his winnings at Calgary.

Eddie's total point score on the circuit was 881, and Lawson Fore was just 57 points behind him.

For the Medicine Hat Stampede alone, Red McDowell was the winner in saddle bronc-riding, Del Haverty in bareback, Junior Vaughn in calf-roping, Sherman Sullins in steer-decorating, and Eddie in bull-riding.

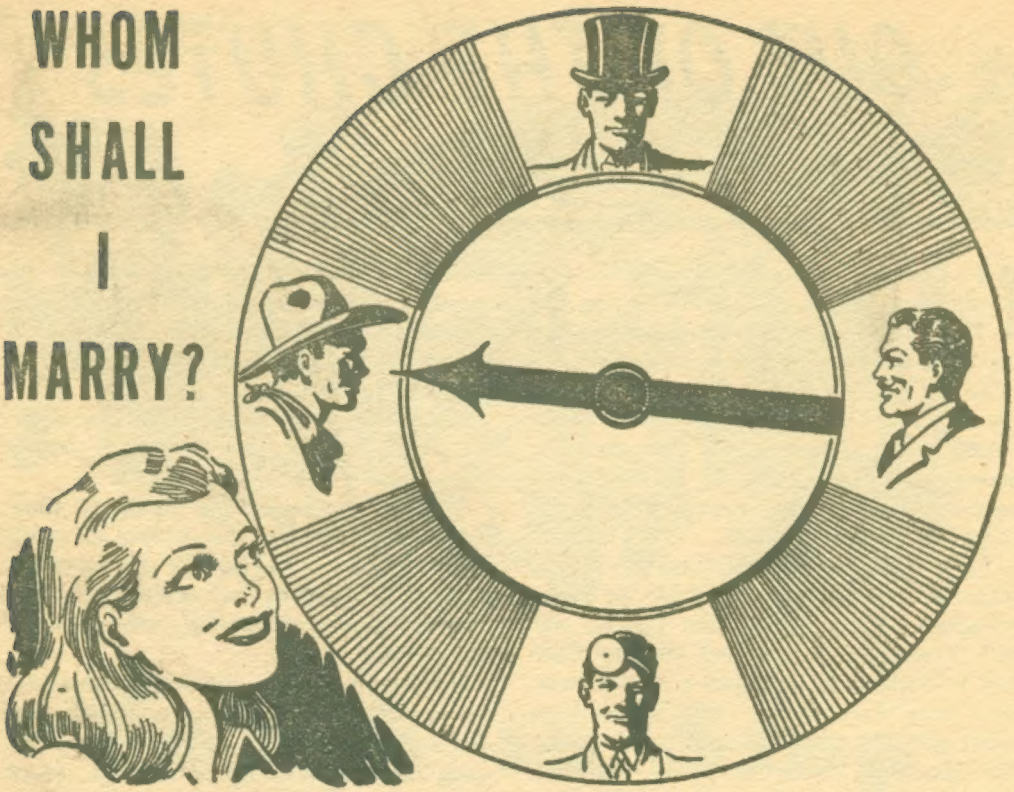
We ought to have learned by this time not to let anything surprise us, but we were stopped in our tracks by news of a swimming horse contest up in Billings, Mont. There was a field of 15, all of whom easily swam the 675-foot course on Lake Elmo. The winner was Cappy, a 14-year-old ex-cowhorse, who came out of nearly a year's retirement to enter the race and win $400

Another horse who is getting along but who has no intention of retiring is Murphy, the close companion of rodeo producer Leo Cremer for 17 years now. Murphy and Cremer have worked together in more than 150 rodeos which add up to about 1,200 performances.

Murphy, of course, has learned from experience that all rodeo stock is not as well mannered as he. Back in his early youth he was twice gored by Brahma bulls, so now he keeps a sharp eye on everything that's going on. Cremer says he never has to worry about keeping out of the way of salty critters—Murphy will see to that. Not only has he good looks (he's a palomino), but he is smart, besides. "The most intelligent horse I ever owned," says Cremer.

*Adios,* THE EDITORS

# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



*By Professor Marcus Mari*

***Man of Scorpio*** ***Oct. 24—to Nov. 22***

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His mate should be rather easy-going, kind and generous in disposition, warm-hearted and affectionate. He does not want a housekeeper for a wife; he wants a mate who will laugh and play as he wants to. Despite being highly emotional, the Scorpio man won't cling to a family just because it is his. If he's unhappy, he tries to change his life. But companionship, laughter, love and as generous a spirit as is his will hold him forever.

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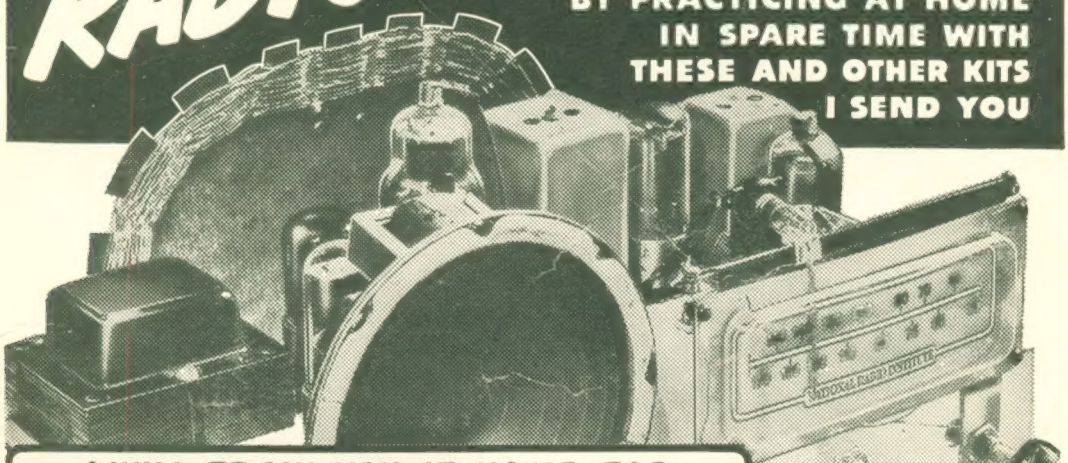

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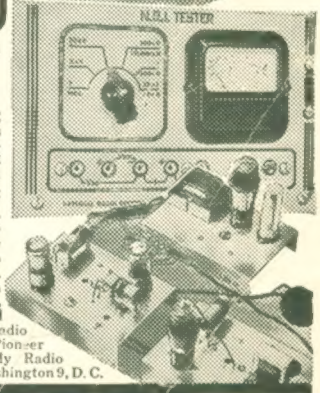


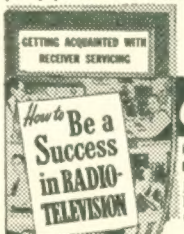


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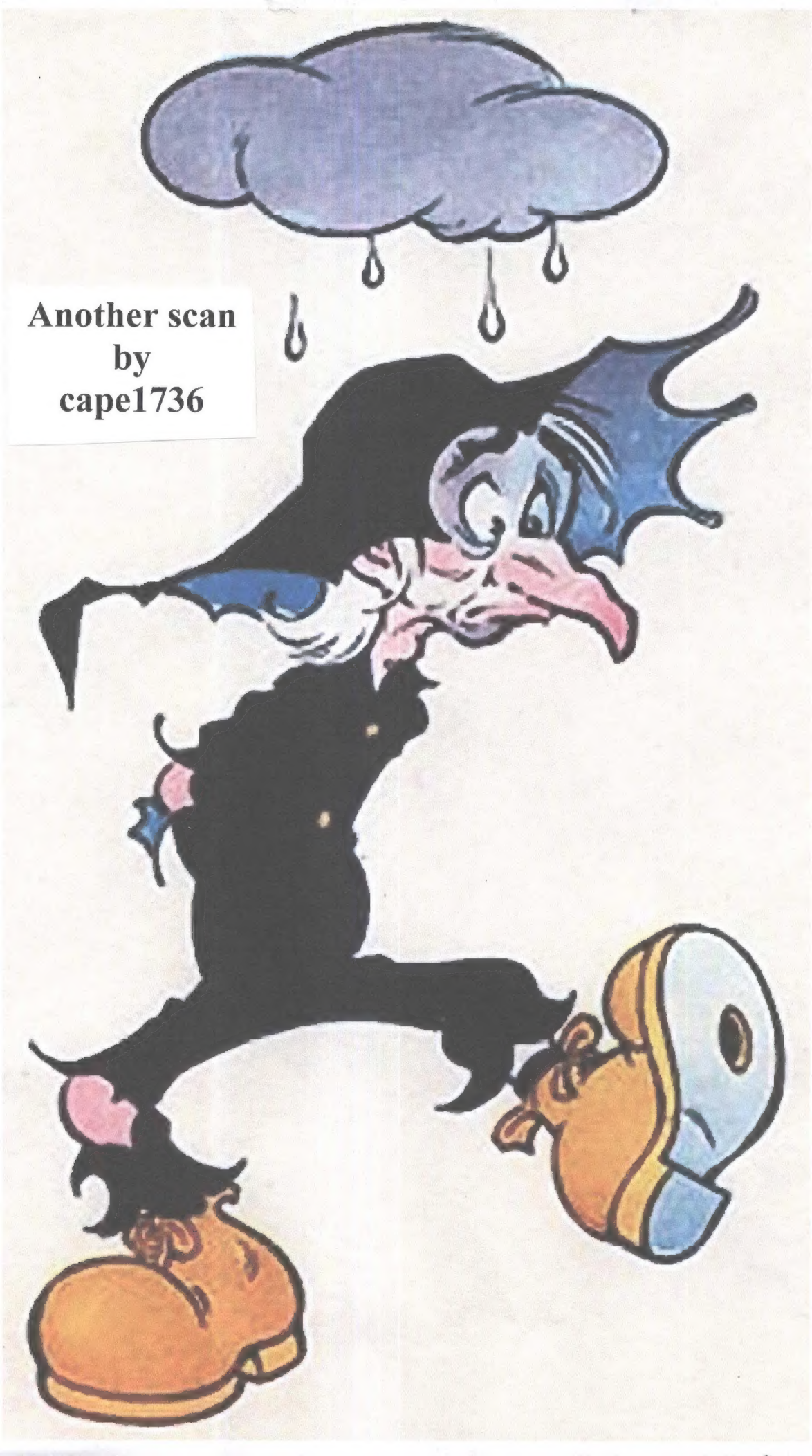
City..... State.....

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐


Another scan
by
cape1736